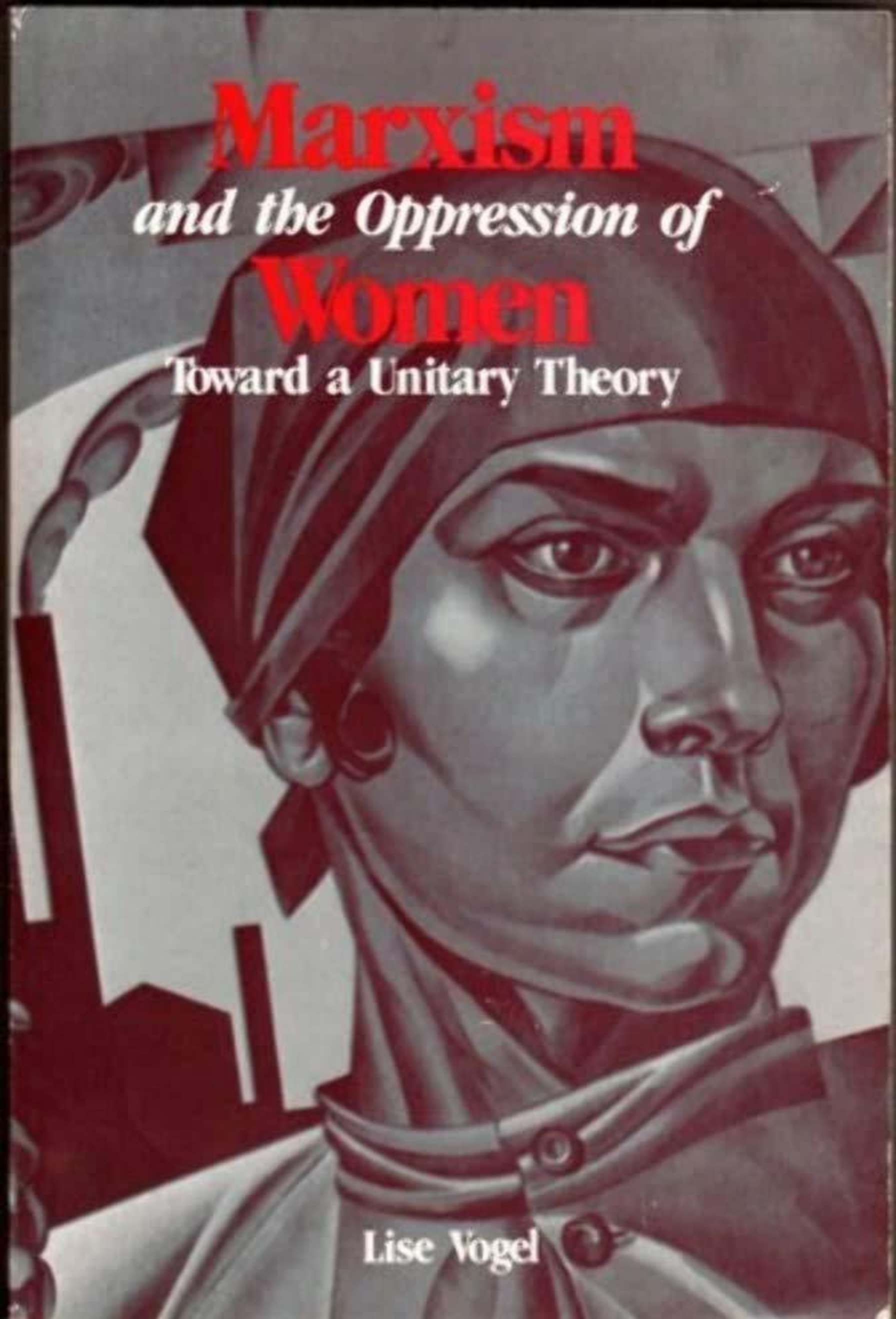
Marxism and the Oppression of Women

Toward a Unitary Theory



Lise Vogel

Marxism and the Oppression of Women

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Marxism and the Oppression of Women

Toward a Unitary Theory

By

Lise Vogel

New Introduction by

Susan Ferguson and David McNally

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

In loving memory of my mother Ethel Morell Vogel,
my aunt Anna Vogel Colloms,
and my father Sidney Vogel M.D.

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Preface

This project began more than ten years ago. Like that of many other women in the late 1960s, my commitment to the emerging women's liberation movement coincided with my discovery of Marxist theory. At first, it seemed to many of us that Marxist theory could simply be extended in order to address our concerns as women's liberationists. Very soon, we recognised that this solution was far too mechanical, and left much to be explained. The Marxist theory we encountered, and the socialist legacy of work on women's oppression, required thorough transformation. With this realisation, some turned away entirely from Marxism. Others persisted in the attempt to use Marxist theory, aiming now to develop a 'socialist-feminist' synthesis that would transcend the inadequacies of the socialist tradition. While sympathetic to this approach, I continued to pursue the original goal of extending Marxist theory, and quickly came up against the necessity of examining just what Marxist theory is. Additionally, a careful reading of the major nineteenth-century texts pertaining to the so-called woman-question made it clear that the theoretical tradition is highly contradictory. In the past several years, I have sought to confront these and related problems. This book is the result. Not surprisingly, its order of presentation parallels the development of my own thinking on these issues. That is, the text begins with an evaluation of socialist-feminist theory, moves on to a critical reading of the nineteenth-century writings, and closes with a theoretical treatment of women's oppression that situates it in the context of the overall reproduction of society. In the course of working on the book, my respect for socialist-feminist efforts to address the question of women's oppression has deepened. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that the revival of Marxist theory, not the construction of some socialist-feminist synthesis, offers the best chance to provide theoretical guidance in the coming battles for the liberation of women.

When I first started work on the problem of women's oppression, a text by Marx caught my attention. He is commenting on the relationship between religious ideology and social reality, and uses the Christian holy family as his example: 'Once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the

former must then itself be criticised in theory and revolutionized in practice'.[1] It seemed to me that with these words, Marx had also captured the essence of a historical-materialist understanding of family-experience. Indeed, socialists have attempted to criticise as well as revolutionise 'the earthly family' for more than a century, although with limited effectiveness. The conditions that gave rise to today's women's liberation movement have at last, I think, produced the possibility of a more adequate critique and a real revolution. But possibilities are never certainties. As early as 1971, Juliet Mitchell had analysed the state of the women's liberation movement in terms of a potential battle between liberationists with a socialist analysis and feminists with a radical-feminist analysis. The suggestion of a way forward which she made then remains valid, I believe, today:

> We have to develop our feminist consciousness to the full, and at the same time transform it by beginning a scientific-socialist analysis of our oppression. The two processes must go on simultaneously – feminist consciousness will not 'naturally' develop into socialism, nor should it: the two are coextensive and must be worked on together. If we simply develop feminist consciousness . . . we will get, not political consciousness, but the equivalent of national-chauvinism among Third World nations or economism among working-class organisations; simply a self-directed gaze that sees only the internal workings of one segment; only this segment's self-interest. Political consciousness responds to all forms of oppression.[2]

It is precisely the need to respond to all forms of oppression while simultaneously deciphering the specific character of women's oppression that has motivated my efforts. To the so-called woman-question I make, therefore, a clear reply. In the words of Lillian Robinson's poem:

> Women?
> Yes.[3]

Several articles came to my attention too late to be incorporated in the text. They are relevant to the arguments I make concerning the limited scope of the concept of patriarchy, and the problems inherent in paralleling sex, race, and class as comparable sources of oppression. Recent work in social history emphasises that the concept of patriarchy does not suffice to explain the complex linkages among women's oppression, family-experience, and social reproduction. Two

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1. Marx 1968, p. 29. Vogel 1979. This text was, in fact, an 1888 revision by Engels of Marx's 1845 notes. For discussion, as well as a more accurate translation of the 1888 version, see note 5 of Chapter 4.
2. Mitchell 1971, pp. 93–4.
3. Robinson 1975.

studies on the family-wage and on occupational segregation by sex are especially interesting: May 1982 and Baron 1982. The problem of the paralleling of different oppressions is raised by several studies that document the history of women of colour and analyse the specific consequences of racial and national oppression for women. Jacqueline Jones,[4] for example, shows that slave-families on American plantations represented an arena of support, autonomy, and resistance for the slave-community, while simultaneously nurturing the seeds of later patriarchal family-relations. Bonnie Thornton Dill[5] analyses how the history of oppressed groups created barriers to social participation that affect women in these groups today. Such studies shed light on the reasons underlying black women's general distrust of the contemporary women's movement, for feminist emphasis on the analogy between sex- and race-oppression and on sisterhood tends to deny the special character of racial and national oppression. By breaking with the simplistic paralleling of sex, race, and class as comparable sources of oppression, Jones, Thornton Dill, and others establish the foundation for a strategic orientation that responds to the special concerns of women of colour. Feminists and socialists must, in Thornton Dill's words, go beyond 'the concept of sisterhood as a global construct based on unexamined assumptions about [women's] similarities' if they wish to develop strategies for social transformation that can unite women on a more solid basis.

4. Jones 1982, pp. 235–69.
5. Thornton Dill 1983, pp. 131–50.

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Excerpts from Engels, Frederick 1972 [1884], *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, New York: International Publishers.

Robinson, Lillian 1975, 'The Question' from *Robinson on the Woman Question*, Buffalo: Earth's Daughters.

Portions of Vogel, Lise 1981, 'Marxism and Feminism: Unhappy Marriage, Trial Separation or Something Else?' in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, edited by Lydia Sargent, Boston: South End Press.

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Vogel, Lise 2000, 'Domestic Labour Revisited', *Science & Society*, 64, 2: 151–170.

Capital, Labour-Power, and Gender-Relations: Introduction to the *Historical Materialism* Edition of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*

Susan Ferguson and David McNally

Every book has its curious life-history. While some soar to great heights of success on a wave of public acclaim, others quickly plunge into obscurity. Then there are those that live a largely underground existence, kept alive through the efforts of small bands of dedicated followers who spread the word in defiance of a larger silence. The latter is the story of Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. First published in 1983, Vogel's work appeared at a moment of acute disarray for the socialist-feminist movement that had shaped the book's very terms of reference. Reeling under the hammer-blows delivered by neoliberalism in the political sphere and postmodern theory in the intellectual realm, and deeply disoriented by the retreat of working-class, socialist, and women's movements, socialist feminism clung to a desperate existence on the very margins of intellectual and political life. A decade earlier, a book like Vogel's would have become a lightning-rod for energetic discussion and debate. By the mid-1980s, it barely registered on the cultural radar.

But the sheer originality of Vogel's text helped nourish its below-the-radar survival, ensuring that it would not entirely disappear. Despite its unpropitious moment, individual Marxist and socialist-feminist scholars and activists (the current authors among them) spread the word, pointing readers towards arguably the most sophisticated Marxist intervention in the theoretical debates thrown up by socialist feminism. And today, amidst a resurgence of anti-capitalist struggle and a small renaissance for Marxist and radical thought, its republication seems both timely and compelling. There is, after all, a growing hunger for theoretical work that integrates accounts of diverse forms of oppression into an overarching anti-capitalist analysis. To that end, key lines of argument laid down in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* offer indispensable resources for the rigorous development of historical-materialist theorisations of capitalism and women's oppression.

First and foremost, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* is distinguished by the fact that Marx's *Capital* (Volume I) forms its theoretical point of departure. To be sure, many socialist feminists had deployed Marxist texts for analytical purposes. Typically, however, works such as *The German Ideology* or Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* constituted the main points of reference. From such texts, analysts derived general commitments to a focus on the social production and reproduction of material life. But rarely did writers engage with the locus of Marx's mature account of the capitalist mode of production, to be found in his life's work, *Capital*. Yet, as Vogel recognised, any serious Marxist account of women's oppression in capitalist society is obliged to reckon with the central theoretical categories of that towering work. Put simply, Marx's critical procedure in *Capital* disclosed a series of interrelated concepts – the commodity, value, money, capital, labour-power, surplus-value, and so on – that were designed to illuminate the deep structural processes through which the capitalist mode of production reproduces itself. So, while materialist commitments in general are laudable, the specific historical-materialist theorisations unfolded across *Capital* move us to a markedly higher level of conceptual clarity. By raising the problem of women's oppression within the categorical framework of *Capital*, and by doing so in more than an *ad hoc* fashion, Vogel opened a new direction for socialist-feminist research. And while her text is by no means entirely successful in this regard, its accomplishments are nonetheless considerable. To see this, we need to undertake a brief excursion through the field of socialist-feminist theorising in the decade and a half prior to the appearance of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*.

Socialist-feminism: domestic labour, postmodern theory, and social reproduction

Throughout the 1970s, socialist feminism developed as a distinct political and theoretical current sustained by a vigorous research-project. Socialist feminists were largely united by a commitment to understanding women's oppression as grounded in socio-material relations intrinsic to capitalism, rather than as simple products of attitudes, ideologies, and behaviours. To this end, they turned to theoretical approaches associated with Marx's materialist conception of history.

One crucial way in which Marxism differentiates itself from 'bourgeois' theories of society is in its commitment to materialism, or, to be more precise, its commitment to theory grounded in the embodied human practices through which socio-material life is produced and reproduced. To be a Marxist is to delve into the realm of the concrete, historically-constructed relationships of

people and things, and to hold up the patterns, rules, and contradictions discovered in that realm as critical explanations of the social. And it was a confidence in this approach that inspired the rich, groundbreaking Marxist-feminist literature of the 1960s and 1970s, a body of work that developed in conversation with the increasingly radical ideas of the left wing of the contemporary women's movement.[1] Emerging at the end of the 1960s, the domestic-labour debate crystallised the quest to locate the socio-material foundations of women's oppression in the terms and concepts of Marxian political economy.

That debate – the problems it set out to explore, the paths down which it took readers, and the eventual collapse of its analytic framework – sets the scene for *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. While Vogel rehearses those contours in Chapters Two and Nine in some detail, it is worth taking a moment, here, to summarise the aims and trajectory of that debate.

Previous feminisms had identified the household as a site of women's oppression, and some had loosely related the domestic sphere to the realm of production. But it was not until 1969, with the publication of Margaret Benston's article 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation', that the *work* women performed within the household became a subject of critical enquiry. Benston's originality lay in proposing an understanding of that work as *productive labour* – a process or set of activities upon which the reproduction of (capitalist) society as a whole depends.[2] Quite simply: without domestic labour, workers cannot reproduce themselves; and without workers, capital cannot be reproduced.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this single move. Benston's formulation introduced an analytic framework in which to situate experiences that feminists of an earlier generation such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan could only describe. Intuiting the power of that framework, socialist feminists set out, over the following decade, to theorise domestic labour as an integral part of the capitalist mode of production. In and through the pages of *Radical America*, *New Left Review*, the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, and other journals,[3] they probed Marxist concepts of use-value and exchange-value, labour-power, and class for what these might reveal about the

1. While there is no hard-and-fast line differentiating socialist feminism from Marxist feminism, the latter tended to identify itself explicitly with historical materialism and Marx's critique of political economy. This is the sense in which we use the term.

2. There was, however, a decided ambiguity, here: is domestic labour human-productive activity indispensable to social life, or is it also directly productive of capital? Dissent over this question formed a crucial socialist-feminist debate.

3. Hartmann 1981, pp. 34–5 n. 10 provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the contributors beyond those Vogel discusses. See also Luxton 2006, p. 43 n. 14.

political-economic significance of mundane household-chores from washing dishes and cooking meals to clothing and nurturing children.

Two definitive, related, questions emerged: does domestic labour produce (surplus-) value? Does domestic labour constitute a mode of production unto itself, distinct from the capitalist mode? Vogel traces the efforts of Benston, Peggy Morton and Mariarosa Dalla Costa to work through these questions, showing how their contributions led to the following responses: 'No', domestic labour produces use-value not exchange-value, and does not, therefore, directly produce surplus-value; and 'possibly', domestic labour is its own mode of production, operating according to a distinct pre- or non-capitalist logic.

Thus, if the domestic-labour debate drew attention to the potential of a Marxian political-economic analysis of women's oppression, its conclusions also appeared to highlight its decided limits. In 1979, Maxine Molyneux and Heidi Hartmann, in two separate articles (published in *New Left Review* and *Capital and Class* respectively) offered sharp assessments of those limits. Citing its economic reductionism, functionalism, and confusion between levels of analysis, they pronounced the domestic-labour debate moribund. Few commentators at the time disagreed. While not fully dismissing Marxism, the critics cast doubt on the capacity of Marxian political economy to offer anything more than a limited understanding of women's oppression. Indeed, calling Marxism 'sex-blind', Hartmann urged that a 'specifically feminist analysis', patriarchy-theory, should supplement it. The 'marriage' or more hopeful union of Marxism and feminism was over; a 'new direction for marxist feminist analysis' could only be developed if the two movements – each with somewhat different, at times contradictory, aims – could learn to respectfully co-habit.[4]

While Hartmann's article made the call for a 'dual-systems' approach (one that is socialist *and* feminist, rather than socialist-feminist) explicit, the fact is that many socialist feminists (including participants in the domestic-labour debate) were already operating on such terms. But, as the contributions to a 1981 collection of articles responding to Hartmann, *Women & Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, attest, the dualist perspective was also deeply flawed. Dual-systems theory, critics held, was unable to adequately theorise the rationale for just two distinct spheres (where did racism and heterosexism fit into this schema, they asked); neither could it compellingly explain the nature of the inter-connection between patriarchy and capitalism. Iris Young suggested that these problems spoke to a fundamental methodological evasion: 'Dual systems theory allows traditional marxism to maintain its theory of production relations, historical change, and analysis of the structure of capitalism

4. Luxton 2006, pp. 2–3.

in basically unchanged form . . . [seeing] the question of women's oppression as merely an additive to the main questions of marxism'.[5]

The solution, she continued, was to develop:

> a theory of relations of production and the social relations which derive from and reinforce those relations which takes gender relations and the situation of women as *core* elements. Instead of marrying marxism, feminism must take over marxism and transform it into such a theory. We must develop an analytical framework which regards the material social relations of a particular historical social formation as one system in which gender differentiation is a core attribute.[6]

While her own proposal on how such a *unitary* theory of women's oppression might be achieved – through a division-of-labour analysis – disappoints,[7] the notion that the very categories of Marxism could be re-envisioned through a feminist lens, and an analysis of gender-relations integrated into an overarching 'theory of the relations of production', opened up a significantly new line of enquiry.

Yet, Young's proposal arrived at an inauspicious time. The emergence of neoliberalism, which for the sake of convenience we can date from the elections of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in 1979 and 1980 respectively, corresponded to a new period of social retreat for the Left in which previous gains by labour- and social movements were aggressively rolled back. Disoriented by a period of retreat, many activist-groups turned their gaze inward as they struggled to sort through the political-organisational challenges that anti-racist and queer politics posed to their assumed unity and identities. Political retreat also induced theoretical defections and reorientations. Commitments to emancipatory and revolutionary politics now seemed increasingly passé, out of touch with the social fragmentation and culture of consumerism that were hallmarks of an ostensibly new era. The moment was propitious, therefore, for the disavowal of 'grand narratives' that was a hallmark of postmodern and poststructural theory. A cult of the particular became the order of the day; the striving after unitary theories of any sort was glibly dismissed as the quaint pursuit of fossilised 'modernists'.

Socialist feminism, too, bent under the winds of this political and intellectual shift. Michele Barrett's analysis of patriarchy as *ideology* – a powerful set of precapitalist ideas able to withstand the very real equalising impulse that characterises capitalism – was crucial in this regard.[8] Barrett's Althusserian Marxism

5. Young 1981, p. 49.
6. Young 1981, p. 50.
7. As Vogel points out, Young's analysis ultimately 'threatens to recreate the very dualism she wishes to avoid', Vogel 1983, p. 192 n. 4.
8. For a critique of Barrett's historiography, see Brenner and Ramas 1984.

seemed a healthy corrective to the overly mechanistic models informing earlier socialist feminism. But it also fed into (and was arguably swallowed up by) poststructuralist and postmodern approaches which displaced the very materialist orientation to social theory that had distinguished the socialist-feminist discussions of domestic labour. Soon caught up in a poststructuralist wave of high theory, left-feminist academics often appeared irrelevant to those who were continuing to fight in their workplaces and communities for feminist rights and freedoms. However, activist-circles also witnessed a sharp turn away from Marxism, as various politics of identity moved to the fore. In this context, it became almost axiomatic for scholars and activists alike to dismiss Marxism in general, and Marxian political economy in particular, as an outdated, hopelessly reductionist explanatory framework, inadequate to building a comprehensive theory of women's oppression. Meanwhile, the sprinkling of far-left groups who insisted otherwise too-often defended past orthodoxies, displaying an unwillingness to acknowledge that historical materialism had real work to do in analysing women's oppression in capitalist society.

Yet there were some important exceptions, particularly those who continued to engage with Marxian political economy through a 'social-reproduction' perspective. Indeed, it is fair to say that the specifically Marxist-feminist current within socialist feminism increasingly gravitated toward a social-reproduction framework, rather than a focus on domestic labour *per se*. Certainly, social-reproduction feminism adheres significantly to the spirit of Young's appeal. It shares the premise that women's oppression under capitalism can be explained in terms of a unitary, materialist framework. Rather than locate the basis of that framework in the gendered division of labour (as Young did), however, it takes the daily and generational production and reproduction of labour-power as its point of departure.

Marxism and the Oppression of Women is one of the first contributions to the building of this approach. Other, mostly Canadian, socialist feminists were moving in the same direction as Vogel around the same time, but Vogel's book is the most theoretically robust and sustained early exploration of this problematic in relation to the conceptual architecture of Marx's *Capital*.[9] While, as Vogel acknowledges, such an approach does not claim to explain all aspects of women's oppression as it is lived under capitalism, it does establish a firm socio-material foundation for understanding that oppression.[10] It thereby retrieves socialist feminism from a single-minded preoccupation with ideas and discourse, while also avoiding the methodological difficulties of the early domestic-labour

9. See Ferguson 1999, for a review of other work that explored and developed the social-reproduction-feminist paradigm in the early 1980s.

10. Vogel 1983, p. 138.

debate and dual-systems theory. In so doing, it lays out the parameters of a theory of women's oppression under capitalism that aspires to be both materialist and historical.

Reworking Marx: theorising the production and reproduction of labour-power

Marxism and the Oppression of Women carries a significant subtitle: *Toward a Unitary Theory*. That subtitle links Vogel's project to the socialist-feminist search for a single, integrated theoretical account of both women's oppression and the capitalist mode of production. Rather than grafting a materialist account of gender-oppression onto Marx's analysis of capitalism – and running into the methodological eclecticism that plagues dual-systems theory – Vogel proposes to extend and expand the conceptual reach of key categories of *Capital* so as to rigorously explain the roots of women's oppression. To do this, of course, involves approaching *Capital* in an anti-doctrinaire fashion, accenting its critical-scientific spirit as a research-programme inviting the extension and development of its central concepts. Vogel's quest for a unitary theory not only does this; it also probes theoretical absences in *Capital*, places where the text is largely silent when it need not – indeed *should not* – be.[11] *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* thus pushes *Capital*'s own conceptual innovations to logical conclusions that eluded its author and generations of readers.

To see what Vogel is getting at, it may be helpful to follow the flow of Marx's argument in *Capital*, tracking those points where he touches on what Vogel identifies as the key problem – the biological, social, and generational reproduction of labour-power – as well as those places where he lapses into silence just where he ought to have explored that crucial issue.

Capitalism and its 'special commodity'

A pivotal moment in the drama of *Capital* arrives when the commodity that sustains the entire system of surplus-value production – human labour-power – makes its appearance. As our eyes turn to that 'special commodity',[12] we discern a vital clue to the mysteries of capital: only when an enormous mass of people are dispossessed and forced onto the labour-market to seek the means of life,

11. Vogel suggests (Vogel 1983, p. 62) that Marx's omissions in this area flow from his tendency to naturalise an historically-specific division of labour. This is clearly part of the story. In addition, as we shall see, Marx's views may have been skewed by his belief that the working-class family was in a state of irreversible disintegration.

12. Marx 1976, p. 270.

by selling their labouring capacities for a wage, can the systematic process of capital-accumulation be launched. Capital, in other words, 'can spring into life, only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour-power. And this one historical condition comprises a world's history'.[13]

Having identified labour-power as the hinge upon which the entire system turns, Marx declares that 'We must now examine more closely this peculiar commodity, labour-power. Like all others it has a value. How is that value determined?'[14] This question – as to how the value of labour-power is determined – has excited significant controversy in Marxist scholarship, and it has also preoccupied many socialist-feminist theorists. But if we follow Marx too quickly here, we run the risk of failing to ask an equally powerful – and, for present purposes, more crucial – question: how is that special commodity itself produced and reproduced? Marx senses that there is an issue, here, but he does not get to the heart of it. Vogel's critical insight involves interrupting Marx's argument at just this point, by asking: what are the *conditions of possibility* of this 'special commodity', labour-power, the very pivot of the capitalist economy? What is the nature of the social processes through which labour-power is itself produced? Vogel's answer is decisive. 'Labor power . . . is not produced capitalistically'. Rather, it is produced and reproduced in a 'kin-based site', the 'working class family'.[15] Focusing on the working-class family is not itself an original move. Vogel's innovation has to do with the social role she ascribes to the working-class family (itself organised on the basis of age- and gender-difference) and the ways in which she analyses this. To begin by identifying the working-class family as the social site for the production/reproduction of the special commodity, labour-power, Vogel shifts from an overriding preoccupation with the *internal* structure and dynamics of this family-form to its *structural relation* to the reproduction of capital. Of course, other feminist theorists had focused on the relationship of the working-class family to capital via the reproduction of labour-power. But the majority of these critics erroneously concluded that because domestic work produces the labour-power that creates value and surplus-value for capital it too must be a form of value-creating labour.[16] Vogel clearly grasps what is wrong

13. Marx 1976, p. 274.
14. Ibid.
15. Vogel 1983, pp. 151, 170. Others had, of course, touched on this issue prior to the appearance of Vogel's text. See, for example, Seccombe 1974; Quick 1977; and Gimenez 1978. But we are not aware of any analyst prior to Vogel having explored this issue as systematically and in such considered relation to *Capital* Volume 1, as did Vogel.
16. This mistaken notion was promoted by Dalla Costa and James 1972; Gardiner 1975; and Humphries 1977, among others. It has recently been repeated by Hensman 2011, pp. 7–10.

with this argument: labour in the household is not commodified; it produces use-values, not commodities whose sale realises surplus-value for the capitalist.

Others, too, had noted as much, but unlike these domestic-labour theorists, Vogel's appreciation of this reality does not lead her to argue that the socio-material basis of women's oppression can be found in the gender-relations within the household. While the family is fundamental to women's oppression in capitalist society, the pivot of this oppression is not women's domestic labour for men or children, however oppressive or alienating this might be. Rather, it pivots on the social significance of domestic labour for capital – the fact that the production and reproduction of labour-power is an essential condition undergirding the dynamic of the capitalist system, making it possible for capitalism to reproduce itself. And while this does not strictly have to be carried out within households – state or private-run orphanages, for instance, take on the responsibility of reproducing labour-power, too – the fact that it is overwhelmingly a private, domestic affair undertaken according to the bio-physical fact that procreation and nursing require female-sexed bodies, explains why the pressures on the household to conform to unequal gender-norms exist in the first place. That is, women are oppressed in capitalist society not because their labour in the home produces value for capital, nor because of a transhistorical patriarchal impulse pitting men against women (although such attitudes have of course persisted across time and place). The socio-material roots of women's oppression under capitalism have to do instead with the structural relationship of the household to the reproduction of capital: capital and the state need to be able to regulate their biological capacity to produce the next generation of labourers so that labour-power is available for exploitation.[17]

It is important to emphasise that this account need not be a form of 'functionalism'. For the argument here is not that capitalism *created* the heterosexual nuclear family for these purposes. The claim instead is that family-forms which pre-existed capitalism were defended by working-class people anxious to preserve kinship-ties, and that they were also reinforced and modified by deliberate social policy on the part of capitalist states (we discuss both sides of this in the next section below). Through complex and sometimes contradictory social processes, then, family-forms compatible with the privatised reproduction of labour-power were both preserved and adapted to a modern bourgeois gender-order.

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17. It may be helpful to think of Vogel's contribution in these terms: in focussing on a social precondition of the labour-process under capitalism – the reproduction of labour-power – she foregrounds the relationship between women and capital, suggesting that the relationship between women and men be understood within this historical context, and not ahistorically, as a universal, transhistorical phenomenon.

In advancing this argument, Vogel gives us an historical-materialist basis for understanding the persistence of gendered family-forms across the space and time of the capitalist mode of production. With this insight, the nature of the Marxist-feminist debate is transformed. No longer is the household itself an adequate analytical frame; the domestic unit is now theorised in relation to the reproduction of capital. At the same time, the specificity of work in the home is retained, rather than being misleadingly conflated with commodified (and thus value-producing) labour-processes.

This perspective grounds women's oppression in capitalist society in the central relations of the capitalist mode of production itself. In order to secure the production and reproduction of current and future supplies of labour-power, capitalism requires institutional mechanisms through which it can exercise control over biological reproduction, family-forms, child-rearing, and maintenance of a gender-order. As much as male-female relations within households may express and socially reproduce a male-dominant gender-order, these are not the totality of women's oppression. Indeed, because of the strategic role of private households as (in principle) sites for the production and reproduction of labour-power, it follows that female-led, single-parent families are part of the matrix of gender-oppression, as are households led by two or more women. The capitalist gender-order is thus structurally founded not on a transhistorical patriarchy or a separate domestic mode of production, but on the social articulation between the capitalist mode of production and working-class households, which are fundamental to the production and reproduction of labour-power.[18]

Having located the key point at which Vogel innovates with respect to Marx's analysis, let us now return to *Capital* in order to indicate the ways in which Vogel is confronting logical absences in Marx's text.

The working-class family and the generational reproduction of labour-power

Marx is far from oblivious to capital's need for generational renewal of the supplies of labour-power. Indeed, he builds this into his theory of wages. Taking up the question of the value of the commodity labour-power, which is expressed in wages, Marx tells us that this is not just a question of reproducing the direct wage-labourer. After all:

> The owner of labour-power is mortal. If then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous conversion of money into capital

18. Other social institutions, particularly schools, also play important roles, here. But private households remain the linchpin of labour-power's bio-social production and reproduction.

> assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself, 'in the way that every living individual perpetuates himself, by procreation'. The labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power. Hence the sum of the means of subsistence necessary for the production of labour-power must include the means necessary for the labourer's substitutes, i.e. his children, in order that this race of peculiar commodity-owners may perpetuate its appearance in the market.[19]

Here, however, we encounter a problem: beyond procreation, Marx is noticeably silent on the processes through which the next generation of 'the race of peculiar commodity-owners' is birthed and raised. Indeed, rather than theorise the social relations and practices through which future wage-labourers are produced, Marx reverts to a simple naturalism, instructing us that, when it comes to 'the maintenance and reproduction of the working class', capitalists 'may safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation'.[20]

Yet this is clearly a non-answer to the problem. Just like procreation, drives for self-preservation and propagation are organised within socio-cultural forms of life. And these forms cannot be taken for granted, as a purely naturalistic theory would suggest, since they are socio-historically created and reproduced. There is, in other words, no maintenance and reproduction of children- and adult-labourers outside of social-institutional forms of life. In Marx's day, as in our own, these are predominantly kin-based units known as families. Here, however, we encounter a problem, for Marx held that the capitalist mode of production was destroying the working-class family. His analysis in these regards is thoughtful and occasionally visionary, as we shall see. But at no point does he recognise that the destruction of the working-class family would mean the elimination of that social site in which the production and reproduction of labour-power occurs. As a result, he fails to recognise the contradictory character of capitalist development in this area: if kin-based families are the key sites for the production and reproduction of labour-power, then capitalist economic dynamics that undermine such families will be deeply problematic for capital as a whole. To be sure, Marx was acutely aware of the destructive effects of capital on working-class households. *Capital* overflows with outraged excurses on child-labour, as well as female labour. And the damaging domestic effects of these phenomena are frequently noted, as in the following observation:

> The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first result of the capitalist application of machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and workers, the machine, was immediately transformed into a means for increasing the

19. Marx 1976, p. 275.
20. Marx 1976, p. 718.

> number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the worker's family, without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of independent labour at home, within customary limits, for the family itself.[21]

In a footnote to the passage above, Marx further observes, 'capital, for the purposes of its self-valorization, has usurped the family labour necessary for consumption'.[22]

These passages are noteworthy for the ways in which Marx registers the reality of domestic work, describing it as 'independent labour at home' and 'family labour necessary for consumption'. He is here at the threshold of identifying the problem of how the (non-capitalist) production and reproduction of the special commodity at the heart of capitalism is to be secured. Were he to have confronted that question directly, he would have been forced to reckon with the contradictions it throws up for his own claim that industrialisation, machinery, and the growth of female and child-labour were undermining the working-class family. For that claim would then sit uneasily with the recognition that some social institution, like the kin-based working-class family, is essential to the reproduction of a wage-labouring class. In another passage, we witness Marx's partial recognition of the gendered dimensions of this question:

> Since certain family functions, such as nursing and suckling children, cannot be entirely suppressed, the mothers confiscated by capital, must try substitutes of some sort. Domestic wrk, such as sewing and mending, must be replaced by the purchase of ready-made articles. Hence, the diminished expenditure of labour in the house is accompanied by an increased expenditure of money outside. The cost of production of the working class family therefore increases, and balances its greater income. In addition to this, economy and judgment in the consumption and preparation of the means of subsistence becomes impossible.[23]

Here, Marx effectively raises the question of biological difference – not pregnancy and birthing, about which he is silent, but 'nursing and suckling'. In so doing, he tacitly acknowledges that the work of producing the next generation has a distinctly gendered character rooted in biological difference. This, of course, opens onto the question as to why women experience unique forms of oppression in capitalist societies. And at just this point, Vogel makes a critical contribution, arguing that the social organisation of biological difference constitutes a

21. Marx 1976, p. 517.
22. Marx 1976, p. 518 n. 38.
23. Ibid., n. 39.

'material precondition for the social construction of gender differences'.[24] While men may well assume some of the domestic labour associated with child-rearing and maintaining households, there are crucial processes for which they are not biologically equipped. Here, however, we need to be quite precise. It is not biology *per se* that dictates women's oppression; but rather, capital's dependence upon biological processes specific to women – pregnancy, childbirth, lactation – to secure the reproduction of the working-class. It is this that induces capital and its state to control and regulate female reproduction and which impels them to reinforce a male-dominant gender-order. And this social fact, connected to biological difference, comprises the foundation upon which women's oppression is organised in capitalist society.[25]

Vogel's analysis, in this respect, conforms closely to the logic of *Capital*. Yet, if Marx did not pursue this line of argument, it seems to have been for two reasons. One is the clear tendency in his writings to treat male-female relations as natural, not social.[26] The other reason is his excitement at the prospect of the working class being (destructively) liberated from patriarchal family-forms. This view clearly emerges in both *The German Ideology* (1846) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Whereas the former text argues that the proletarian family has been 'actually abolished', the *Manifesto* insists that 'by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder'.[27] *Capital* stands in a significant continuity with those earlier texts on this question. Moreover, Marx insists there that the dissolution of the working-class family, appalling as it is, prepares the way to a more progressive social form:

> However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes. It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be absolute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms which, moreover, taken together form a series in historical development. Moreover, it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily, under suitable conditions,

24. Vogel 1983, p. 142.
25. Note that this gender-order does not require that all women give birth. Rather, it entails gendered relations in which the social responsibility for birthing and raising the next generation is coded as female. On this point, see also Armstrong and Armstrong 1983.
26. Vogel 1983, p. 62.
27. Marx and Engels 1975a, p. 180; and Marx and Engels 1973, p. 84.

> become a source of humane development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalistic form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery.[28]

This vision of a new and 'higher' form of relations between women and men, and adults and children is inspiring. But it is based on a faulty premise: that capitalist development inevitably spells the disintegration of the working-class family. In fact, Marx failed to register the overall significance of concerted legislative moves, particularly throughout the Victorian period in Britain, to reassert gender-differences and to reinforce the working-class family. Parliamentary commissions figured prominently, here, particularly the Report of the Children's Employment Commission (in two parts) and the Coalmines Regulation Act (both of 1842). Reports such as these spurred legislative processes designed to limit child-labour and hours of work, and to restrict female employment. Combined with legislation creating mandatory public schooling of children, the state had clearly undertaken to counter infant- and child-mortality rates, 'educate' children in the skills and docility appropriate to industrial capitalism, and reassert gendered divisions of labour that reinforced the identification of women with the domestic sphere. (It is interesting, in this regard, that female work in the mines was restricted, while frequently more onerous domestic service went untouched.) Moral panics accompanied all these processes, including a telling alarm about trousered women working underground with picks and shovels, which coincided with legislation banning women and girls from below-ground work in the mines. Across the Victorian period, then, the state sought to reconstitute the working-class family by way of new restraints on female and child-labour, a reinforced gender-order, the state's responsibility for public education of children, alongside health- and sanitation-reform – much of it promoted by way of fear about the dirty, uncivilised working-class hordes, at home and in the colonies, and fear of transgressive working-class women in particular.[29]

Of course, working-class people also campaigned to defend their household-life and kin-networks. In so doing, they unwittingly accelerated reforms that were in the long-term interests of capital – restrictions on child-labour, pressures for a male 'family-wage', and limits on female employment – and which also buttressed the dominant gender-order.[30] As a result, female participation-rates in paid employment stabilised at around 25 percent across the nineteenth-

28. Marx 1976, pp. 620–1.

29. See McClintock 1995, pp. 114–18, who also explores the psychoanalytic dimension of such gender-panics.

30. See Clark 1995. For a thoughtful discussion of these processes, see Humphries 1977; and Laslett and Brenner 1989.

century, and child-employment declined.[31] The decomposition of the working-class family was thus halted; indeed, reversed.

It is instructive that Marx failed to grasp this, and continued to believe that the working-class family was dissolving. This is, in part, a symptom of his taking for granted what cannot be assumed – that new supplies of labour-power will invariably be both generationally and socially reproduced, and that already-existing supplies will be reproduced daily, not just in adequate quantities but with the appropriate 'skills' and 'aptitudes'. Notwithstanding his own observations about the destructive effects of capitalist industrialisation on proletarian families, Marx continued to fall back on a naively naturalistic account in which, when it came to reproducing the working class, capital could 'safely leave this to the worker's drives for self-preservation and propagation'.

As we have seen, however, Marx's own dialectical logic invites the sort of amendment that Vogel proposes. Just like the reproduction of capital, the reproduction of labour-power too requires a critical-social account. But this is not possible without a theorisation of the biological, social, daily, and generational reproduction of labour-power, and the social organisation of biological difference this entails in a capitalist society. In short, the internal relations between gender, the family, and the capitalist mode of production must be thematised if we are to make sense of gender-oppression in capitalism in a way that meshes with the conceptual structure of *Capital*.

Critics and criticisms

As we have noted, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* created barely a stir in feminist and Marxist circles upon its publication. The sole scholarly response of any significance was written by Johanna Brenner, author of one of the most important social-feminist works of the 2000s.[32] For Brenner, Vogel's book is remarkable as a contribution to radical historiography, particularly in its retrieval of the Marxist tradition on the 'woman-question', and for situating it within the political context of the early socialist movement. Vogel, she suggests, extends our understanding of the roots of dual-systems theory, tracing it to classics by Engels and Bebel, while identifying an alternate 'social-reproduction' approach derived from Marx's mature works. Brenner is less impressed, however, by Vogel's theoretical innovations, suggesting that her social-reproduction framework fails adequately to consider the conflicts of interest between men and women,

31. Humphries 1977, p. 251.

32. Brenner 2000. As further evidence of the scholarly neglect of Vogel's book, we note that it does not garner a mention in the impressive survey of historical-materialist work on gender-relations provided in Haug 2005.

especially with respect to the active role men play in instituting and maintaining gender-oppression. As a result, she argues, Vogel passes over key socialist-feminist questions about why men 'almost universally' exercise power over women within the family-system.[33]

Intriguingly, Brenner attributes this failure to the 'high level of abstraction and generality' of Vogel's analysis. 'An adequate "unitary" theory', she insists, 'would have to specify at least how class structure sets the limits within which subordinate classes organize families and households and how these terms are set in such a way as to encourage "male-dominated" family systems'. Such a project, she continues, involves looking beyond the 'material basis' of society to the ideological and political structures that comprise the gender-hierarchy. Lacking such an account, Vogel offers only a 'preliminary stage' of social-reproduction theory.[34]

Brenner's comments, here, are instructive for the degree to which they articulate the very problem Vogel has set out to solve: the establishment of a theoretically indispensable first-level analysis of capital-, gender-, and social reproduction that will make a unitary theory – as opposed to a dualist or purely descriptive account – possible. Brenner is indeed correct that Vogel does not try to theorise the exercise of male power within the household *per se*, or to provide an historical account of its development. Instead, her interest is in analysing what it is about the fundamental relations of capitalism that seems to require a family-system based upon a male-dominated gender-order. As she puts it, 'it is the responsibility for the domestic labor necessary to capitalist social reproduction – and not the sex division of labor or the family per se – that materially underpins the perpetuation of women's oppression and inequality in capitalist society'.[35] Unlike so much feminist thought, especially after the linguistic turn in social theory, she seeks to decipher the socio-material foundations for a household-system based on female oppression. To this end, she explores the way in which specifically-capitalist dynamics establish definite limits on the possible range of institutions and practices of social reproduction. In identifying capital's contradictory need to exploit *and* renew labour-power – and considering this in light of the necessarily differentiated relationship of men and women (or male-sexed and female-sexed bodies) to the procreative and nursing aspects of those practices – Vogel identifies the socio-material dynamic of the capitalist system

33. Brenner 1984, p. 699. Brenner rightly criticises Vogel for her overly narrow review of the socialist tradition on 'the woman-question', noting that she fails to engage with the work of either the anarchist Emma Goldman or the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai.

34. Ibid.

35. Vogel 1983, p. 170.

that tends to reproduce patriarchal family-forms, as it persistently has across the spaces and times of world-capitalism.

Of course, here we are dealing with a tendency, not an iron law. The fact that social reproduction is, and must be, played out through embodied individuals enmeshed in the imperatives of capitalism does not mean that any and all family-forms are functionally determined. Cultural traditions and social struggles will also shape the range of available household-arrangements. But by identifying the key problem of the necessity under capitalism for a social site that biologically and socially reproduces labour-power, Vogel's analysis allows us to understand why capitalist societies, notwithstanding a wide array of diverse histories, have repeatedly reproduced male-dominated family-forms. Similarly, it also offers a way of understanding why domestic forms can change in significant ways, as with the growing legal recognition and acceptance of same-sex marriages and households, as well as single-mother or single-father headed households, without women's oppression being eliminated. For however much ruling classes have resisted the relaxation of gender-norms and sexual mores, these changes have not inherently undermined the gendering of fundamental responsibilities for the birthing, nurturing, and raising of young children. In these ways, Vogel does indeed set the 'preliminary stage' for a social-reproduction theory that logically connects women's oppression to essential features of the capitalist mode of production.[36] Rather than a weakness in her work, this is, as we have argued above, a singular accomplishment of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*.

By working within the conceptual architecture of *Capital*, Vogel not only opens up a most fruitful line of historical-materialist enquiry; she also overcomes some considerable weaknesses of earlier socialist feminism. In particular, as we have seen, she lucidly rebuts the flawed claim that unpaid labour in the home produces both value and surplus-value. At the same time, however, Vogel falls into the trap of arguing that domestic labour is a component of necessary labour in the sense in which Marx used the term in *Capital*.[37] She clearly erred, here, as she later acknowledged in the 2000 article from *Science & Society* that is reprinted as an appendix to this book. Vogel was, of course, right that the labour of producing and reproducing current and future generations of wage-labourers is socially necessary to capital. But the term 'necessary labour' has a much more restricted meaning for Marx in his theory of surplus-value: it refers to the labour that comprises a *necessary cost* for capital, the labour that must be paid (in wages)

36. It is unfortunate that Vogel later appropriated Althusser's hyper-abstracted notion of 'Theory' uncontaminated by the empirical in order to explain her theoretical procedure in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (see Vogel 2000). In our view, it would be greatly more productive to understand Vogel's procedure as establishing the *conditions of possibility* of family-forms and gender-order in a capitalist society.

37. Vogel 1983, pp. 152–4. The same error appears in Hensman 2011, p. 8.

out of capital's funds.[38] This is why Marx refers to wages as variable capital. There is much more unwaged work – labour that does not have to be paid for by capital – that is necessary to the reproduction of a capitalist society. And capital is certainly greatly aided by the fact that children are birthed, nursed, nourished, loved, and educated in kin-based units, just as adults are physically, psychically, and socially reproduced there. But individual capitals here benefit from social practices that do not form any of their necessary costs.[39] There is thus no rate of surplus-value, here, both because these practices are not commodified (they produce use-values but not values), and because there is no direct cost-structure for capital involved.

Vogel's later correction of this point is an important clarification that readers should bear in mind when reading her text. More than this, it is a reminder of the critical-scientific spirit that informs *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, and that makes it a work capable of renewal, extension, and development.

New agendas: intersectionality, materialist feminism, social reproduction, and the enduring quest for a unitary theory

As we have observed, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* appeared at a most inhospitable moment, just as socialist, working-class and radical social movements were beginning to retreat under the onslaught of the neoliberal offensive. This new and hostile context threw up mounting obstacles to the flourishing of a vibrant socialist-feminist theory and practice. As the years went on, political and intellectual agendas shifted and a Marxist-inflected concern with gender-oppression was relegated to the museums of 'modernist' theory. It was at this moment that the linguistic turn, itself in preparation for decades, swept the humanities and social sciences, and made its imprint on parts of the Left. In a reductionism as blatant as that practiced by any vulgar materialism, language and discourse became *the* determining forces of social life.[40] Discursively-constructed identities became the overriding focus of political analysis, while preoccupations with labour and embodied human-practice were glibly dismissed as quaint if not outright delusional.

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38. Of course, as we have seen, these wages must be adequate to help sustain the production of the next generation of labourers. But the *necessary cost* for capital is the direct payment of the labourers who engage in the immediate process of production.

39. Of course, some of these costs might be claimed by the state by way of taxes on profits. We abstract from that issue here as they do not affect the argument about the rate of surplus-value.

40. For a sample of Marxist treatments of these developments, see Jameson 1972; Palmer 1990; Hennessy 1993; and McNally 2001.

Inevitably, perhaps, as the harsh realities of gender, race, and class persisted, and as imperial militarism intensified, notably during the First Gulf War, discourse theory's rarefied abstractionism and its utter remoteness from political intervention produced a counter-reaction. Theorists committed to materialist modes of critique along with emancipatory politics soon launched theoretical responses to the disabling constraints of 'post theory'. The early 1990s witnessed key moments in this counter-movement, largely initiated under the banners of black feminism and materialist feminism.[41]

Black feminism in particular drove the agenda that gave rise to the framework known as 'intersectionality', which quickly became a major point of reference in a wide range of theoretical debates. This approach had deep roots in the experience of socialist-feminist organisations of African-American women, notably the Combahee River Collective formed in Boston in 1974, in which the scholar-activist Barbara Smith played a central role. Undertaking campaigns around reproductive rights, prison-abolition, rape, lesbian rights, forced sterilisation, and more, the Combahee River Collective and similar black-feminist initiatives had little time for the reduction of politics to discourse. Bodies, particularly the racialised and gendered bodies of black working-class women, figured centrally to their theory and practice.[42] As it emerged from black feminism, the intersectionality-perspective thus maintained an abiding materialist orientation, however much it stretched and modified earlier materialisms.[43]

Patricia Hill Collins, perhaps the most prolific and celebrated feminist of this tradition, insightfully developed W.E.B. Du Bois's contention that social hierarchies of race, class, and nation *co-determined* the political-economic realities of black people in America, thereby drawing attention to the 'matrix of domination' encompassing race, class, and gender.[44] This approach tackled a key problem that had plagued both the dual-systems and identity-politics perspectives: to elucidate the interrelations among distinct dimensions of social experience and the institutions and practices that shape them. However much these earlier perspectives acknowledged a connection between, say, sexism and racism, or class and heterosexism, they paid little attention to the operation of the totality within

41. See, for instance, Collins 1992 and 1993; Smith 1993; Hennessy 1993; Landy and Maclean 1993.

42. It is important to acknowledge the influence on such work of two pioneering texts: Selma James's *Sex, Race, and Class* (James 1975), and Angela Davis's *Women Race and Class* (Davis 1981).

43. There were, of course, black-feminist positions that spun off some of this work in more postmodernist ways. The work of bell hooks is often indicative of this, although hooks has regularly returned to unfashionably non-postmodern concerns with social class. See, for instance, hooks 2000.

44. See Collins 1993, 1998; Collins and Anderson 1992.

which these relations are internally connected. To explicate theoretically such connections became the distinct project of intersectionality.

Intersectionality has inspired significant empirical work documenting how oppression is lived in non-compartmentalised and often contradictory ways. This empirical orientation has been both its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, in drawing attention to the *experience* of oppression, such studies reinserted people, human agents, into the analysis of history and social life. Moreover, this approach understood experience as socially determined in a non-reductive way, in terms of complex and contradictory processes of social organisation and determination. On the other hand, as Johanna Brenner pointed out, much work in this tradition limits itself to describing and explaining the dynamics of specific social *locations*, exploring how a particular location shapes experience and identity, while often failing to ask how those locations are produced and sustained in and through a system of social power. The social *relations* of domination (of a racialised, patriarchal capitalism), in other words, tend to be under-theorised.[45] This is in part because, in deploying the spatial metaphor of intersection, the intersectionality perspective tends to see each mode of domination as a distinct vector of power, which then crosses paths with (intersects) others. But by taking each power-vector as independently given in the first instance (prior to the intersection), this approach struggles to grasp the co-constitution of each social relation in and through other relations of power.[46]

Concurrent with the emergence of intersectionality as a powerful paradigm within feminist theory was the development of materialist feminism. Reacting against the discursive turn, Rosemary Hennessy and others insisted upon returning feminist theory and practice to the extra-linguistic domains of bodies, needs, class-relations, sexuality, and affect.[47] The result is a potent body of work that re-opens earlier socialist-feminist concerns and rehabilitates historical-materialist approaches to understanding gender-oppression. Furthermore, as with black feminists, theorists working within this perspective have developed significant analyses of sexual oppression, even if they merely pointed to the need for a truly integrative theory of capitalism and its multiple oppressions.

Social-reproduction feminism, as it has developed in the years after the publication of *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* also frequently fell short of elaborating a fully integrative account of the co-constituting relations of class, gender, sexuality, and race. Despite the stated goal of developing a unitary theory, signalled promisingly by their commitment to a broad, non-economistic con-

45. Brenner 2000.

46. We return to this point in our discussion of the important work of Himani Bannerji.

47. Hennessy 1993; Landry and Maclean 1993; Hennessy and Ingraham 1997.

ception of labour, many of those working in this tradition defaulted to either a dual-systems analysis or to an atheoretical descriptivism.[48] These tendencies are arguably a legacy of what Himani Bannerji has identified as the structuralist influence on socialist-feminist political economy. Although social-reproduction feminists began from the concept of labour, too often they tended to conceptualise labour as a *thing*, operating within another thing or *structure* (e.g. the economy, household, or community). Such a positivist approach, observes Bannerji, loses a sense of history, of the processes of becoming through which structural relations are constituted, and of the subjects of that history in particular. As a result, many socialist feminists have created 'an unbridgeable gap between self, culture and experience, and the world in which they arise and have little to say about political subjectivity'.[49] This is one reason, she suggests, that there is such a deep silence about racism in the social-reproduction feminism of the 1980s and 1990s. Having failed to grasp the complex and contradictory processes through which the multiple dimensions of social life create an integral and dynamic whole, much Marxist-feminist thought faltered when it came to theorising the social totality in all its diversity.

But a more recent line of inquiry within the social-reproduction-feminist perspective shows greater promise, approaching its analytic categories – labour, the economy, households, and so on – as *processes* rather than things. Insofar as it succeeds, this perspective opens up the possibility of a more genuinely *historical*-materialist reading of the social relations of power, one that identifies the conditions under which race, gender, sexuality, and class are (co-)reproduced, transformed and potentially revolutionised. Isabella Bakker, Stephen Gill, Cindi Katz, and David Camfield have all contributed to this re-imagining of the social-reproduction framework.[50] Rather than present structures in which subjects merely act out the systemic logic of their social locations, their work conceives of the social as a set of past and present practices, which comprise a system of structured relations that people experience, reproduce, and transform over time. This transformative activity is understood as labour, broadly defined. The world, as Camfield points out, is significantly the product of people's reproductive labour – or what, as Bakker and Gill emphasise, Gramsci would call 'work'.[51]

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48. Examples of the reversion to dual systems and descriptivism are discussed in Ferguson 1999.

49. Bannerji 1995, p. 80. As we have noted, Vogel's later embrace, via Althusser, of a rarefied notion of 'Theory' uncontaminated by the empirical, commits a similar error (see Vogel 2000).

50. See Katz 2001; Camfield 2002; and Bakker and Gill 2003. As we have intimated above, this work would be strengthened in and through the dialectical approach to experience developed by Bannerji.

51. Such a perspective need not involve a simple humanist voluntarism. If humans are themselves understood as part of nature, as embodied beings capable of making history,

In positioning labour, conceived as conscious, sensuous, practical activity, at the starting point of analysis (instead of structures and functions), these theorists both return to and build upon Vogel's central insight, without lapsing into structuralist functionalism. The notion that the production and reproduction of labour-power is actually a process undertaken by socially located people, brings agency and, ultimately, history, back into the picture. It also brings bodies into the equation. And while social-reproduction feminists, beginning with Vogel, have long weighed the question of the biophysical nature of (labouring) bodies – particularly, how or why women's biological capacity to give birth and nurture infants matters – they have not devoted much effort to thinking through the racialised (labouring) body. Ferguson suggests a potential place to begin such a discussion, by interrogating the spatialisation of bodies in a hierarchically ordered capitalist world, while Luxton along with Bakker and Silvey propose an argument along similar lines.[52] Although much remains to be done to flesh out a social-reproduction framework that fully accounts for gender-, race-, and other social relations, the conception of labouring (re)producing subjects central to such recent work offers a promising beginning.

Exciting historical-materialist analyses of race and sexuality offer other promising beginnings to which we can turn in developing a renewed Marxism capable of grasping the social as 'the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse'.[53] While it is not possible to deal with these literatures in anything approximating a comprehensive fashion here, it may be useful to indicate some key sources and directions.

With respect to the analysis of race and racial oppression, in addition to the literatures of black feminism cited above, important work on 'the wages of whiteness', which also takes its departure from W.E.B. Dubois, has contributed enormously to understanding the psychological investments many white workers make in racialised identities and structures of power.[54] In synch with the theoretical orientation of the best recent work in social-reproduction theory, these analyses reinstate working-class people as agents in the making (as well as the unmaking) of race and racism. In a similar vein, albeit from a quite different angle of attack, a growing body of work by the historian Robin D.G. Kelley has insightfully documented aspects of the making of the black working

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then the notion of world production remains enmeshed in the natural and the biological, while also reworking it. On this point, see McNally 2001.

52. Ferguson 2008; Luxton 2006, pp. 38–40; Bakker and Silvey 2008, p. 6.

53. Marx 1973b, p. 101.

54. See Roediger 1991, 1994, 2008; and Ignatiev 1995. For the foundational text, here, see Dubois 1998. In our view, work such as this can and should complement important Marxist scholarship on racism and social control of the sort developed by Allen 1994, 1997.

class in the United States, including its gendered dimensions, and the way in which that experience has involved the political-cultural production of enduring 'freedom dreams'.[55] Recognising that experiences of gender, race, and class are always already mutually inflected, or co-constituted, Kelley has also attended closely to the development of 'a new multiracial urban working class' in America, analysing the interconnection of diverse aspects of social experience in capitalist society.[56]

Equally promising is the emergence of a vibrant Marxist scholarship on sexuality and queerness, particularly studies that have examined the class-tensions involved in the formation of queer identities shot through by socio-cultural processes of commodification. Linking sexual-identity formation to larger social processes of capital-accumulation in racialised and gendered spaces, these studies are interrogating the dialectics of class, sexuality, race, and gender in subtle and provocative ways.[57] In so doing, they are making indispensable contributions to the development of a robust historical materialism of late capitalism in which sexuality and sexual oppression are positioned as essential features of any viable unitary theory of capitalist society.

None of these theoretical developments, however, can productively engage one another outside a dialectical social theory. And while many theorists have been working in this area, few have been more effective at laying the groundwork for an 'anti-racist feminist marxism' than Himani Bannerji. Starting with the notion of experience, as does E.P. Thompson in his discussion of the *making* of a working-class,[58] Bannerji develops a dialectical and multi-dimensional analysis centred on the concept of mediation. The advantage of this concept lies in its insistence that our 'immediate' experience of the world is always socially and historically mediated.[59] As a result, each 'moment' of social experience is always already refracted through, or mediated by, other moments. Rather than trying to grasp distinct social relations that arrive at an intersection, this approach proposes a 'relational and an integrative analysis' designed to theoretically construct 'a meditational and formational view of social practice'.[60] Bannerji suggests that such a methodological approach is simultaneously deconstructive – disassembling the totality to locate distinct moments of the whole – and dialectically reconstructive: 'At its best it is a relational and integrative analysis which

55. Kelley 1990, 1994, 2002.
56. Kelley 1997.
57. Hennessy 2000; Sears 2005; Floyd 2009. For earlier work, see Smith 1983; Kinsman 1987.
58. Thompson 1963. Bannerji's notion of experience is also deeply indebted to the work of Dorothy Smith. See Smith 1987.
59. The classic discussion, here, is Hegel 1977, Chapter 1.
60. Bannerji 1995, p. 67.

needs a deconstructive method to display the process of mediation. It can both take apart and put back together (in a non-aggregative fashion) an event or an experience within a wider context by using a materialist theory of consciousness, culture and politics'.[61]

By proposing that no category of social experience is not already inflected, refracted, and constituted in and through others, this perspective understands the social whole as always a (frequently antagonistic) unity of differences. In so doing, it can attend to both the differentiated mediations of social life *and* their complex unity, the very task Marx described when he advocated grasping the concrete as 'the concentration of many determinations', and, therefore, the 'unity of the diverse'.

To be sure, such a project can only ever be an unfinished one. Yet, a central task of historical materialism is to develop a conceptual map of the real in all its complex and contradictory processes of becoming. And this is impossible without a theory of the ongoing production and reproduction of the social totality. It was Marx's great innovation to have grasped the ways in which the production and reproduction of labour-power – and the histories of dispossession and expropriation it implies – is the great secret to understanding the totalising processes of capital. By putting that secret at the centre of the analysis in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, and linking it to specifically female reproductive activities in working-class households, Lise Vogel critically extended Marx's project and made an indispensable contribution to understanding the gendered forms of capitalist social reproduction. That there is much more work to be done in that regard should not prevent us from appropriating and developing this work's most powerful insights.

61. Ibid.

Chapter One
Introduction

The 1960s marked the appearance of movements for the liberation of women in virtually every capitalist country, a phenomenon that had not been seen for half a century. Beginning in North America, this second wave of militant feminism spread quickly. Great Britain and the nations of Europe reacted first to the North American stimulus, and a new feminist consciousness emerged as well in such places as Japan, India, Iran, and Latin America. Although reminiscent of earlier feminism, the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s necessarily constituted a specific response to new social conditions. Not the least of its peculiarities was the existence of a significant trend within it known as socialist feminism or Marxist feminism, which sought to merge the two traditions so self-consciously linked together. Socialist feminism, argued its proponents, represents 'a unique politics that addresses the interconnection of patriarchy and capitalism, with the goal of dealing with sexism, class conflict, and racism'.[1]

The emergence of a socialist-feminist trend in the late 1960s was an extremely important development. Socialist feminism stood in solidarity with anti-imperialist and progressive struggles both at home and abroad. Simultaneously, it placed itself in opposition

1. Red Apple Collective 1978, p. 39. While socialism and Marxism are of course not synonymous, I use the terms socialist feminism and Marxist feminism interchangeably, following ordinary practice within the contemporary women's movement in the United States. Socialist feminism is not, moreover, the exclusive province of women: the New American Movement called itself a socialist-feminist organisation.

to a growing radical-feminist tendency that considered male supremacy the root of all human oppression and the main obstacle to female liberation. By the mid-1970s, however, the socialist-feminist movement began to lose some of its momentum and bearings, as anti-imperialist activity receded and as many Marxist women withdrew from socialist-feminist organisations, if not from the women's movement altogether. The theoretical and organisational perspectives of radical feminism now appeared to offer more guidance to socialist feminists than they had before, particularly on the critical questions of sexuality, interpersonal relations, ideology, and the persistence of male domination throughout history. At the same time, women's experience in revolutionary movements and socialist countries seemed more removed from immediate socialist-feminist concerns. A certain pessimism regarding the achievements of existing socialist movements and the possibilities of current revolutionary initiatives developed. In this atmosphere, some socialist feminists became persuaded that Marxism could not be transformed or extended by means of the application of feminist insight. They suggested, moreover, that such a goal is not only unattainable, but betrays women's liberation to the demands of socialism. Whereas socialist feminism had originated in a commitment to the simultaneous achievement of women's liberation and socialist revolution, that double commitment now threatened to break apart.

This book constitutes an argument *for* the power of Marxism to analyse the issues that face women today in their struggle for liberation. It strongly rejects, however, the assumption made by many socialists that the classical-Marxist tradition bequeaths a more or less complete analysis of the problem of women's oppression. In this sense, it could be called a socialist-feminist work, although it shares neither the current scepticism among socialist feminists as to the usefulness of Marxist theory, nor their high hopes for radical-feminist perspectives. Instead, the text argues that the socialist tradition is deeply flawed, that it has never adequately addressed the question of women, but that Marxism can nevertheless be used to develop a theoretical framework in which to situate the problems of women's oppression and women's liberation.

The force and character of the feminist upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s, and of its socialist-feminist component, owe much to the particular circumstances of the post war period. Serious transformations in capitalist domination followed the end of World-War II as the structure of power began to undergo profound changes, both within each nation and internationally. Women, regardless of their class, soon faced significantly altered tasks, expectations, and contradictions.

During World-War II, an emergency mobilisation had thrust women into an unprecedented variety of new roles, many of them traditionally the preserve of men. With the War's end and the return of the soldiers, the situation changed

dramatically. Men flooded into the labour-force, pushing women back down the job-ladder or out altogether.

In reality, women's participation in the labour-force never returned to its pre-war level. Within a few years, moreover, statistics revealed a new phenomenon. Whereas, before the War, the typical woman-worker had been young, unmarried, and only temporarily in the labour-force, by 1950 large numbers of older married women, often with school-age children, had entered the labour-force on a semi-permanent basis. The trend was to continue unabated, in flagrant contradiction to the ideal of the nuclear family.

The social impact of these shifts in the character of female labour-force participation was blunted by the intensification of the ideology emphasising women's place in the home. Beginning in the late 1940s, a new emphasis on domesticity projected images of the happy home-maker devoting herself solely to the consumption of goods and services and to the socialisation of children in isolated nuclear-family households. Women, especially wives, were working in increasing numbers but were supposed to believe that their real identity lay in their family-roles. In more intimate fashion, the myth of the nuclear family fostered interpersonal relations characterised by hierarchy, oppression, and isolation, thereby contributing at the psychic level to the post war reconstruction of stability.

Tensions between the norm of the nuclear family and the reality of women's lives were especially sharp in the United States. In the late 1950s, they reached the breaking point, as more and more women chafed at the bonds of what Betty Friedan was soon to name the feminine mystique. The early 1960s witnessed the beginnings of a critique, which took a variety of political, ideological, and organisational forms. Many of these converged in the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) by a group of militant middle-class feminists. Founded in 1966, NOW announced its purpose to be 'to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society *now*, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men'.[2]

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2. Important landmarks in the early sixties include the following: In 1961, President Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, whose final report appeared in 1963. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, heralded by magazine-articles and media interviews. As the book quickly became a bestseller, a series of more scholarly reconsiderations of woman's place – led off in 1964 by a special issue of *Daedalus*, the magazine of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences – signalled a new turn in liberal ideology. Meanwhile, legislation and executive orders had begun to create a governmental policy structure in support of women's equality: the 1963 Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and executive orders in 1962 and 1965 prohibiting discrimination in federal employment. For NOW's statement of purpose, see Hole and Levine 1971, p. 85.

To all appearances, the new movement represented a genuine revival of traditional liberal feminism, seeking complete equality for women within capitalist society. Two characteristics distinguished it, however, from older forms of liberal feminism. First, the feminists of the 1960s began to extend the concept of equality beyond the earlier movement's emphasis on formal equality in the civil and political sphere. NOW, for instance, initially focused on legal redress, but its concerns soon extended to areas of female experience formerly viewed as private, and untouched by traditional feminist programmes. It demanded childcare facilities and control over one's own reproductive life as basic rights for all women. Implicit, if not explicit, in the discussion about such rights were the issues of sexuality and the sex-division of labour in housework. Furthermore, the feminists of the Kennedy-Johnson years sometimes distinguished among women by economic status, as when NOW argued for the right of poor women to secure job-training, housing, and family-support. This differentiation marked a break, however unwitting, from the strict emphasis on formal equality that typified nineteenth-century versions of feminism. With its extreme sensitivity to the most subtle aspects of inequality, as well as its occasional forays into questions of sexuality, the sex-division of labour in the household, and differential economic oppression, the new movement pushed liberal feminism to its limits.

The second characteristic that distinguished modern feminism from its nineteenth-century predecessor was the political atmosphere out of which it emerged. The women's movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had ridden the crest of an advancing capitalist world-order, demanding, in essence, that the promise of equality held out by the triumphant bourgeoisie be extended to women. While individual feminists argued that women needed more than equal rights, and that bourgeois society itself required transformation, their critiques represented a visionary strain, largely peripheral to the mainstream-feminist movement of the time. In sharp contrast, modern feminism drew strength from the critique of capitalism that flourished and deepened following the end of World-War II. Internationally, capitalism had come under siege, as large portions of the world freed themselves from direct imperialist domination, often turning to socialism. A number of countries began to follow strategies for the achievement of human liberation in a socialist society that differed sharply from policies pursued in the Soviet Union. At the same time, national-liberation movements around the world were intensifying their struggles to achieve independence. These developments in the international arena shaped a more thoroughgoing consciousness of the issues of freedom, equality, and personal liberation. It was against this background that a newly militant movement for civil rights emerged in the United States in the 1950s serving, in turn, as an important inspiration for the feminist movement of the early 1960s. Both movements

demanded equality within the framework of capitalist society, yet pressed the notion of equal rights to the threshold of a vision of liberation.

Not until the mid-1960s did large numbers of people step across that threshold. In the United States, the rise of black-liberation movements, highly sensitive to international developments, converged with the intensification of the war in Vietnam. Periodic urban insurrections, an aggressive anti-war movement, and resistance to the war within the military itself shook the country. Meanwhile, a massive resurgence of Left activity swept Europe in the wake of the May 1968 events in France. And everywhere, the Chinese Cultural Revolution inspired a new generation of social activists, who rejected all attempts to resolve discontent within the confines of bourgeois society. Drastic social transformation seemed on the immediate agenda. In this atmosphere, a 'women's liberation movement' emerged in the United States, its founding members seasoned as (white) activists in the Civil Rights, community-organising, and anti-war movements. Seemingly independent of all earlier feminist efforts, including the liberal feminism of the early 1960s, the new movement initially adopted the form of small groups committed to consciousness-raising, local organising, and, at times, direct action. Unlike the more sober feminism of such organisations as NOW, women's liberation succeeded in tapping and mobilising the dissatisfaction engendered by the many contradictions in all aspects of women's lives. 'Sisterhood is powerful' argued the women's liberation movement, as it rapidly spread throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and beyond. No sphere of experience could escape attention, moreover, for these feminists recognised that 'the personal is political', and put their theories into practice. In a period of social upheaval, the women's liberation movement catapulted the idea of female liberation into public consciousness and laid the groundwork for a mass women's movement.

From the start, activists in the women's liberation movement differed among themselves on the role of women's issues in the process of social change, and developed distinct strategic orientations. Some saw the fight against women's oppression as part of a larger struggle for socialism. For these women, the task became how to resist a traditional socialist tendency to subordinate feminist issues in the course of the struggle for socialism. Others insisted that the issue of women's domination by men was fundamental to any process of social transformation, had a sharply autonomous character, and required a qualitatively distinct struggle. Here, the problem concerned the demarcation of this position from that held by the most militant liberal feminists. As both discussion and practice deepened, a cleavage developed within the women's liberation movement. Radical feminists increasingly emphasised the primacy of sex-antagonisms in social development, the critical role of sexuality and sexual preference, and the irredeemable weaknesses of socialist work on women. In opposition, another

tendency within the women's liberation movement began to argue that the strengths of radical feminism could in fact be melded with socialist analysis into a new strategy. By the early 1970s, this latter tendency – soon dubbed Marxist feminism or socialist feminism – had consolidated into an important force within the women's movement, as well as on the Left.[3]

Socialist feminists share a general strategic and organisational perspective. They argue that the participation of women, conscious of their own oppression as a group, is critical to the success of any revolutionary struggle. They assert that the key oppressions of sex, class, and race are interrelated and that the struggles against them must be co-ordinated – although the precise character of that co-ordination remains unspecified. In any case, socialist feminists agree on the necessity of an independent movement of women from all sectors of society throughout the revolutionary process: working women; housewives; single women; lesbians; black, brown, and white women; blue-collar and white-collar women, and so on. For socialist feminists, only such an autonomous women's movement can guarantee socialist commitment to women's liberation, particularly in the ideological and interpersonal areas, and in the domestic sphere. Autonomy, they maintain, is a political as well as a tactical principle. Finally, socialist-feminist theorists argue that the movement shares with much of the New Left 'a totalistic view of the socialist transformation, an emphasis on subjective factors in the revolutionary process, and a rejection of mechanical stage-ism'.[4] For most activists, however, the essence and strength of the socialist-feminist movement lie not in its view of socialism but in its tenacious insistence on, and particular interpretation of, the feminist insights that sisterhood is powerful and the personal political.

Theory did not play a large role in the development of the women's liberation movement in its first stages. Indeed, the very ability to exist and grow without firm theoretical or organisational bearings testified to the movement's strength as a real social force. By the early 1970s, however, the movement began to re-evaluate its practice, and to examine more closely the theoretical framework implicitly guiding its activity. In turning to theoretical work, participants in the women's liberation movement addressed practical issues arising out of their political experience. Nowhere was this new commitment to theory stronger than among socialist feminists. Their interest in theory responded, in large part, to a

3. For differing accounts of the history of second wave feminism, see: Deckard 1978; Dixon 1970, and 1972; Easton 1978; Epstein 1980; Sara Evans 1975, and 1979; Freeman 1972 and 1973; Anonymous 1975; Red Apple Collective 1988. For the development of feminist consciousness and movements for women's liberation in the Third World, see: Chinchilla 1977, and 1979; Omvedt 1980, and 1978; Urdang 1979.

4. Anonymous 1975, p. 87.

sense that the already established socialist-feminist strategic orientation needed a more adequate foundation.

Socialist feminists quite naturally looked to the socialist tradition for a theoretical starting point. The issue of women's subordination has a long and relatively distinguished pedigree as an object of concern for socialists. In practice, socialist movements have sought, as best they could, and often with lapses, weaknesses, and deviations, to involve women in social change on a basis of equality. At the theoretical level, socialists have generally conceptualised the problem of women's oppression as 'the woman-question'. The socialist theoretical tradition has been unable, however, to develop adequate or consistent answers to this so-called woman-question, as socialist feminists soon discovered. In the gloomy wake of this failure, socialist feminists pose a series of difficult questions that must be confronted more successfully. These questions centre on three interrelated areas:

First, all women, not just working-class women, are oppressed in capitalist society. Women occupy a subordinate place, moreover, in all class-societies, and some would argue that women are subordinated in every society, including socialist society. What is the root of women's oppression? How can its cross-class and transhistorical character be understood theoretically?

Second, divisions of labour according to sex exist in every known society: women and men do different types of work.[5] In particular, women tend to be responsible for work in the area of child-rearing, as well as other types of labour in the household; they may also be involved in production. Generally speaking, sex-divisions of labour represent stubborn barriers to women's full participation in every society. What is the relationship of these sex-divisions of labour to women's oppression? Given women's child-bearing capacity, how is it possible for women to be truly equal? Should not the very notion of equality be discarded or transcended in order for women to be liberated?

Third, women's oppression bears strong analogies to the oppression of racial and national groups, as well as to the exploitation of subordinate classes. Are sex, race, and class parallel oppressions of an essentially similar kind? Does female oppression have its own theoretically specific character? What is the relationship of the fight against women's oppression to the struggle for national liberation and for socialism?

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5. I use the plural – sex-divisions of labour – because in most societies there are, in fact, distinct divisions of labour according to sex in different areas of work and for different classes, age-groups, and so forth. While the singular term – the sex division of labour – can be taken to include these variations, it tends also to merge them into an abstract unity. For a similar conceptualisation, if not terminology, see Middleton 1979. See also Benería 1979.

Explicitly or implicitly, socialist feminism sets itself the task of developing a better set of answers to these questions than the socialist tradition has been able to offer. But in its haste to define and take up this weighty burden, socialist-feminist theory often leaves behind those elements in the tradition that might actually lighten the load. All too quickly, socialist feminism abandons the socialist tradition's revolutionary Marxist core.

The chapters that follow present a case for the usefulness of Marxist theory in developing a theoretical framework that can encompass the problem of women's oppression. Because the focus throughout is on the material foundations that underpin the oppression of women, certain other aspects must be put to one side for the moment. In particular, the text does not address directly the psychological, interpersonal, and ideological issues that so often form the main subject of writings on the question of women's liberation. Adequate consideration of these crucial issues must be rooted in a materialist theory of women's oppression, and attempts to supply such a theory have been deficient. These deficiencies are noted in the two chapters of Part One, which assess the state of existing theoretical work carried out from a socialist-feminist perspective. Chapter Two surveys the development of socialist-feminist theory over more than a decade. Chapter Three sums up its contributions, emphasising strengths but pointing to certain persistent limitations. Chapter Three also considers the inadequacy of the Marxist theoretical tradition on the so-called woman-question, and suggests that it is in fact very poorly understood. The Marxist theoretical legacy requires serious re-evaluation. Parts Two and Three therefore undertake a review of major texts of the tradition that pertain to the issue of women's liberation. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, the work of Marx and Engels is examined in chronological order, revealing its incomplete and contradictory nature as well as its substantial contribution. Chapters Seven and Eight then discuss the manner in which the efforts of the late-nineteenth-century socialist movement to confront the issue of women's oppression exacerbated the analytical confusion.

With Part Four, the text returns to the problem of developing an adequate theoretical framework. Chapter Nine argues that the Marxist-socialist movement failed to establish a stable theoretical foundation for its consideration of the so-called woman-question. The chapter points out, furthermore, that the socialist legacy actually represents a contradictory mix of divergent views, never sufficiently clarified, much less elaborated in detail. As a result, Marxist efforts to address the problem of women's liberation have been haunted by a hidden debate between two perspectives, only one of which situates the problem within the framework of Marx's analysis of the processes of overall social reproduction. Chapters 10 and 11 therefore take up the task of elaborating this latter perspective. Chapter 10 develops a theoretical approach that puts child-bearing and the

oppression of women at the heart of every class-mode of production. In Chapter 11, the specific situation of women in capitalist society is addressed theoretically, together with the conditions for women's liberation. Both chapters take as their object of analysis the phenomenon of women's oppression in the context of overall social reproduction. That is, the theoretical focus is shifted away from the vague concept of the woman-question, so common in traditional socialist writings. Likewise, the category of 'the family', often used by both socialists and socialist feminists, is found to be wanting as an analytical starting point; its deceptive obviousness masks a tangle of conceptual problems. Hence, these theoretical chapters first establish the basis in social reproduction for women's oppression, before considering the institution known as the family. Once the special character of women's oppression in capitalist social reproduction is understood, for example, it becomes possible to analyse families in capitalist societies.

This book constitutes, it should be emphasised, a theoretical undertaking. It seeks to place the problem of women's oppression in a theoretical context. The last two chapters in particular present what may appear to be a fairly abstract set of concepts and analytical framework. This is as it should be. Only in the analysis of an actual situation will abstraction spring to life, for it is history that puts flesh on the bare bones of theory.

Part One
Socialist Feminism

Chapter Two
A Decade of Debate

Socialist-feminist theory, like the movement to which it owes its existence, is far from monolithic. In general, socialist feminists argue that socialist theory must be extended or even entirely transformed by means of the insights offered by feminist theory and practice. A variety of attempts to execute this transformation has been made, although no consensus yet exists on their adequacy. If anything, socialist feminists increasingly recognise the difficulty of the theoretical task. 'We have been excessively impatient for finished products, answers, and total theories', comments one group. 'We have not allowed for the tremendous amount of work involved in clearing new paths and dealing with new questions'.[1] Nonetheless, more than ten years of theoretical efforts in the name of socialist feminism have left their mark. Despite weaknesses, which sometimes function as obstacles to further progress, the socialist-feminist movement has made the most important advances in the development of socialist theory on the question of women since the nineteenth century.

Initial efforts to develop a socialist-feminist theoretical perspective focused on the family-unit and the labour of housework and child-rearing in contemporary capitalist societies. The opening argument, an article entitled 'Women: The Longest Revolution'[2] by Juliet

1. Red Apple Collective 1978, p. 43.
2. Mitchell 1966.

Mitchell, actually appeared well before the development of the socialist-feminist movement proper. First printed in 1966 in *New Left Review*, a British Marxist journal, Mitchell's piece began to circulate widely in the United States two years later. It rapidly became a major theoretical influence on the emerging socialist-feminist trend within the women's liberation movement. The publication in 1971 of Mitchell's book, *Woman's Estate*, based on the earlier article, reinforced the impact of Mitchell's ideas.[3]

Mitchell begins 'Women: The Longest Revolution' with an intelligent critique of the classical-Marxist literature on the question of women. She comments briefly on the schematic views of women's liberation held by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, August Bebel, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, locating their inadequacies in the absence of an appropriate strategic context. In these texts, 'the liberation of women remains a normative ideal, an adjunct to socialist theory, not structurally integrated into it'. Even Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, while an important contribution, is limited by its attempt to meld 'idealist psychological explanation [with] an orthodox economist approach'. In sum, 'the classical literature on the problem of woman's condition is predominantly economist in emphasis'.[4]

For Mitchell, the way out of this impasse is to differentiate woman's condition into four separate structures: production, reproduction, socialisation, and sexuality. Each structure develops separately and requires its own analysis; together, they form the 'complex unity' of woman's position. Under production, Mitchell includes various activities external to what we might intuitively call the domestic or family sphere, for example, participation in wage-labour in capitalist society. Conversely, the remaining three categories, oppressively united in the institution known as the family, encompass woman's existence outside of production, as wife and mother. In an effort to reach general strategic conclusions, Mitchell then surveys the current state of each of the four structures. Production, reproduction, and socialisation show little dynamism, she says, and indeed have not for years. The structure of sexuality, by contrast, is currently undergoing severe strain, and represents the strategic weak link – that is, the structure most vulnerable to immediate attack.

While one structure may be the weak link, Mitchell argues that socialist strategy will have to confront all four structures of woman's position in the long run. Furthermore, 'economic demands are still primary' in the last instance. In this context, Mitchell makes a number of sensitive strategic observations. The left must reject both reformism and voluntarism on the issue of woman's oppression, for they always lead to inadequate strategic programmes. The reformist

3. Mitchell 1966, and 1971.
4. Mitchell 1966, pp. 15–16.

tendency manifests itself as a set of modest ameliorative demands divorced from any fundamental critique of women's position. The voluntarist approach takes the more belligerent form of maximalist demands concerning the abolition of the family, total sexual freedom, collective child-rearing, and the like. Although these demands appear radical, they 'merely serve as a substitute for the job of theoretical analysis or practical persuasion. By pitching the whole subject in totally intransigent terms, voluntarism objectively helps to maintain it outside the framework of normal political discussion'. In place of such abstract programmes, the socialist movement requires a practical set of demands that address all four structures of woman's position. For instance, in the area of wage-labour, Mitchell observes that 'the most elementary demand is not the right to work or receive equal pay for work – the two traditional reformist demands – but *the right to equal work itself*'. As for the abolition of the family, the strategic concern should rather be the liberation of women and the equality of the sexes. The consequences of this concern are 'no less radical, but they are concrete and positive, and can be integrated into the real course of history. The family as it exists at present, is, in fact, incompatible with either women's liberation or the equality of the sexes. But equality will not come from its administrative abolition, but from the historical differentiation of its functions. The revolutionary demand should be for the liberation of these functions from an oppressive monolithic fusion'.[5]

Questions about Mitchell's analysis of woman's situation arise in four areas. First, the discussion of the empirical state of the separate structures is extremely weak, a failure that has, or should have, consequences in the realm of strategy. To maintain that 'production, reproduction, and socialization are all more or less stationary in the West today in that they have not changed for three or more decades' grossly misrepresents not only post-war history but the evolution of twentieth-century capitalism. Moreover, as Mitchell herself sometimes recognises, the contradictions produced by rapid movement in all four of her structures form the very context for the emergence of the women's liberation-movement. A generally inadequate historical vision accompanies Mitchell's failure to identify contemporary changes in the structures, and her work reveals, overall, a certain disregard for concrete analysis.

Second, Mitchell's view of women's relationship to production is open to serious criticism. She presents production as a structure from which women have been barred since the beginning of class-society. Even capitalism has ameliorated this situation but little, for it perpetuates 'the exclusion of women from production – social human activity'. Like all previous forms of social organisation, capitalist society constitutes the family as 'a triptych of sexual, reproductive,

5. Mitchell 1966, pp. 34–5, and Mitchell 1971, p. 150.

and socializatory functions (the woman's world) embraced by production (the man's world)'.[6] In sum, Mitchell views production as an aspect of experience essentially external to women. Once again she misreads history, for women's participation in production has been a central element of many class-societies. Furthermore, Mitchell persistently devalues women's domestic labour as well, and gives it no clear theoretical status.

A third problem in Mitchell's analysis is her treatment of the family. While she mentions the family at every point, Mitchell denies the category 'family' any explicit theoretical presence. Its place is taken by the triptych of structures that make up the woman's world: reproduction, socialisation, and sexuality. At the same time, the actual content of these three structures has a severe arbitrariness, and Mitchell fails to establish clear lines of demarcation among them. Women are seen as imprisoned in their 'confinement to a monolithic condensation of functions in a unity – the family', but that unity has itself no articulated analytical existence.[7]

Finally, Mitchell's manner of establishing a structural framework to analyse the problem of women's oppression requires critical examination. The four structures that make up the 'complex unity' of woman's position operate at a level of abstraction that renders social analysis almost impossible. They provide a universal grid on which women – and, implicitly, the family – can be located irrespective of mode of production or class-position. Societal variation and class-struggle appear, if at all, as after-thoughts rather than central determinants. Furthermore, the manner in which the four structures combine to produce a complex unity remains largely unspecified, as well as abstract and ahistorical. As a result, Mitchell's theoretical approach resembles the functionalism of bourgeois social science, which posits quite similar models of complex interaction among variables. Indeed, the content of her four structures also derives from functionalist hypotheses, specifically, those of George Murdock. Despite her staunchly Marxist intentions, then, Mitchell's theoretical perspective proves inadequate to sustain her analysis.[8]

Even with its problems, easier to recognise at a distance of more than fifteen years, Mitchell's 1966 article played an extremely positive role within the developing socialist-feminist movement. Its differentiation of the content of women's lives into constituent categories helped women's liberationists to articulate their

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6. Mitchell 1966, p. 34.
7. Ibid.
8. Murdock argued that the universal nuclear family incorporates the 'four functions fundamental to human social life – the sexual, the economic, the reproductive, and the educational [i.e. that pertaining to socialization]'. (Murdock 1949, p. 10.) For critiques of Mitchell's functionalism, see also: Landes 1977–8; Middleton 1974. On the family in functionalist theory, see: Beechey 1978; Morgan 1975; Vogel 1978.

experience and begin to act on it. Its perceptive overview of the classical-Marxist literature on women provided a base from which to confront both mechanical versions of Marxism and the growing influence of radical feminism. Its insistence, within a Marxist framework, on the critical importance of social phenomena not easily characterised as economic, anticipated the socialist-feminist critique of economic-determinism. And the political intelligence of its specific strategic comments set a standard that remains a model. 'If socialism is to regain its status as *the* revolutionary politics', Mitchell concluded, 'it has to make good its practical sins of commission against women and its huge sin of omission – the absence of an adequate place for them in its theory'.[9] In the theoretical arena, Mitchell's central contribution was to legitimate a perspective that recognises the ultimate primacy of economic phenomena, yet allows for the fact that other aspects of woman's situation not only have importance, but may play key roles at certain junctures.

By 1969, the North-American women's liberation movement had reached a high point of activity, its militancy complemented by a flourishing literature, published and unpublished. In this atmosphere, two Canadians, Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton, circulated and then published important essays. Each piece offered an analysis in Marxist terms of the nature of women's unpaid work within the family-household and discussed its relationship to existing social contradictions and the possibilities for change.[10]

Benston starts from the problem of specifying the root of women's secondary status in capitalist society. She maintains that this root is 'economic' or 'material', and can be located in women's unpaid domestic labour. Women undertake a great deal of economic activity – they cook meals, sew buttons on garments, do laundry, care for children, and so forth – but the products and services that result from this work are consumed directly and never reach the marketplace. In Marxist terms, these products and services have use-value but no exchange-value. For Benston, then, women have a definite relationship to the means of production, one that is distinct from that of men. Women constitute the 'group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family'. Hence, the family is an economic unit whose primary function is not consumption, as was generally held at the time

9. Mitchell 1971, p. 86.

10. Margaret Benston's article circulated under the title 'What Defines Women?' and was published as 'The Political Economy of Women's Liberation'. Peggy Morton's original essay, 'A Woman's Work Is Never Done, or: The Production, Maintenance and Reproduction of Labor Power', was abridged in *Leviathan* in May 1970 and then revised for publication as 'A Woman's Work Is Never Done'. See Benston 1969, and Morton 1971.

by feminists, but production. 'The family should be seen primarily as a production unit for housework and child-rearing'. Moreover, Benston argues, because women's unpaid domestic labour is technologically primitive and outside the money-economy, each family-household represents an essentially pre-industrial and pre-capitalist entity. While noting that women also participate in wage-labour, she regards such production as transient and not central to women's definition as a group. It is women's responsibility for domestic work that provides the material basis for their oppression and enables the capitalist economy to treat them as a massive reserve-army of labour. Equal access to jobs outside the home will remain a woefully insufficient precondition for women's liberation if domestic labour continues to be private and technologically backward. Benston's strategic suggestions therefore centre on the need to provide a more important precondition by converting work now done in the home into public production. That is, society must move toward the socialisation of housework and child-care. 'When such work is moved into the public sector, then the material basis for discrimination against women will be gone'. In this way, Benston revives a traditional socialist theme, not as cliché but as forceful argument made in the context of a developing discussion within the contemporary women's movement.[11]

Peggy Morton's article, published in 1970, one year after Benston's, extended the analysis of the family-household as a materially rooted social unit in capitalist society. For Morton, Benston's discussion of how unpaid household-labour forms the material basis of women's oppression leaves open a number of questions: Do women form a class? Should women be organised only through their work in the household? How and why has the nature of the family as an economic institution in capitalist society changed? Morton sees the family 'as a unit whose function is the *maintenance and reproduction of labour power*', meaning that 'the task of the family is to maintain the present work force and provide the next generation of workers, fitted with the skills and values necessary for them to be productive members of the work force'.[12] Using this approach, Morton is able to tie her analysis of the family to the workings of the capitalist mode of production, and to focus on the contradictions experienced by working-class women within the family, in the labour-force, and between the two roles. In particular, she shows that as members of the reserve-army of labour, women are central, not peripheral, to the economy, for they make possible the functioning of those manufacturing-, service-, and state-sectors in which low wages are a priority. While the strategic outlook in the several versions of Morton's paper bears only a loose relationship to its analysis, and fluctuates from workers' con-

11. Benston 1969, pp. 16, 20, 22.
12. Morton 1971, pp. 214, 215–16.

trol to revolutionary cadre-building, her discussion of the contradictory tendencies in women's situation introduces a dynamic element that had been missing from Benston's approach.

Both Benston's and Morton's articles have a certain simplicity that even at the time invited criticism. In the bright glare of hindsight, their grasp of Marxist theory and their ability to develop an argument appear painfully limited. Benston's facile dismissal of women's participation in wage-labour requires correction, as Morton and others quickly pointed out. Moreover, her delineation of women's domestic labour as a remnant from pre-capitalist modes of production, which had somehow survived into the capitalist present, cannot be sustained theoretically.[13] Morton's position, while analytically more precise, glosses over the question of the special oppression of *all* women as a group, and threatens to convert the issue of women's oppression into a purely working-class concern. None of these problems should obscure, however, the theoretical advances made by Benston and Morton. Taken together, their two articles established the material character of women's unpaid domestic labour in the family-household. Each offered an analysis of the way this labour functioned as the material basis for the host of contradictions in women's experience in capitalist society. Morton, in addition, formulated the issues in terms of a concept of the reproduction of labour-power, and emphasised the specific nature of contradictions within the working class. These theoretical insights had a lasting impact on subsequent socialist-feminist work, and remain an important contribution. Moreover, they definitively shifted the framework for discussion of women's oppression. Where Mitchell had analysed women's situation in terms of roles, functions, and structures, Benston and Morton focused on the issue of women's unpaid labour in the household and its relationship to the reproduction of labour-power. In this sense, they located the problem of women's oppression in the theoretical terrain of materialism.

An article by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, published simultaneously in Italy and the United States in 1972, took the argument several steps further.[14] Agreeing that women constitute a distinct group whose oppression is based on the material character of unpaid household-labour, Dalla Costa maintains that on a world level, all women are housewives. Whether or not a woman works outside the home, 'it is precisely what is particular to domestic work, not only measured as number of hours and nature of work, but as quality of life and quality of relationships which it generates, that determines a woman's place wherever she is and

13. For early critiques of Benston, see: Morton 1971; Rowntree 1969; and Salper 1972.

14. Mariarosa Dalla Costa's article 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' was published in Italian in 1972, and appeared simultaneously in English in *Radical America*. A corrected translation is found in Dalla Costa 1973.

to whichever class she belongs'.[15] At the same time, Dalla Costa concentrates her attention on the working-class housewife, whom she sees as indispensable to capitalist production.

As housewives, working-class women find themselves excluded from capitalist production, isolated in routines of domestic labour that have the technological character of pre-capitalist labour-processes. Dalla Costa disputes the notion that these housewives are mere suppliers of use-values in the home. Polemicising against both traditional-Left views and the literature of the women's movement, she argues that housework only appears to be a personal service outside the arena of capitalist production. In reality, it produces not just use-values for direct consumption in the family, but the essential commodity labour-power – the capacity of a worker to work. Indeed, she claims, housewives are exploited 'productive workers' in the strict Marxist sense, for they produce surplus-value. Appropriation of this surplus-value is accomplished by the capitalist's payment of a wage to the working-class husband, who thereby becomes the instrument of woman's exploitation. The survival of the working class depends on the working-class family, 'but *at the woman's expense against the class itself.* The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man . . . And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial'.[16]

Since working-class housewives are productive labourers who are peculiarly excluded from the sphere of capitalist production, demystification of domestic work as a 'masked form of productive labour' becomes a central task. Dalla Costa proposes two major strategic alternatives. First socialise the struggle – not the work – of the isolated domestic labourer by mobilising working-class housewives around community issues, the wagelessness of housework, the denial of sexuality, the separation of family from outside world, and the like. 'We must discover forms of struggle which immediately break the whole structure of domestic work, rejecting it absolutely, rejecting our role as housewives and the home as the ghetto of our existence, since the problem is not only to stop doing this work, but to smash the entire role of housewife'. Second, reject work altogether, especially in a capitalist economy which increasingly draws women into the wage-labour force. In opposition to the Left's traditional view of this latter tendency as progressive, Dalla Costa maintains that the modern women's movement constitutes a rejection of this alternative. Economic independence achieved through 'performing social labour in a socialised structure' is no more

15. Dalla Costa 1973, p. 19.
16. Dalla Costa 1973, p. 52, n. 12; and p. 39.

than a sham reform. Women have worked enough, and they must 'refuse the myth of liberation through work'.[17]

The polemical energy and political range of Dalla Costa's article had a substantial impact on the women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike Benston, Morton, and other North American activists, Dalla Costa seemed to have a sophisticated grasp of Marxist theory and socialist politics. Her arguments and strategic proposals struck a responsive chord in a movement already committed to viewing women's oppression mainly in terms of their family situation. Few noticed that Dalla Costa, like Morton, talked only of the working class, and never specified the relationship between the oppression of working-class housewives and that of *all* women. What was most important was that Dalla Costa, even more than Benston and Morton, seemed to have situated the question of women's oppression within an analysis of the role of their unpaid domestic labour in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Moreover, since her article functioned as the theoretical foundation for a small but aggressive movement to demand wages for housework, which flourished briefly in the early 1970s, it acquired an overtly political role denied to most women's liberation theoretical efforts.[18]

Dalla Costa's vigorous insistence that 'housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value' intensified a controversy already simmering within the socialist-feminist movement. The discussion, which became known as the domestic-labour debate, revolved around the theoretical status of women's unpaid domestic work and its product.[19] Published contributions, usually appearing in British or North American Left journals, established their particular positions by means of intricate arguments in Marxist economic theory – abstract, hard to follow, and in the atmosphere of the period, seemingly remote from practical application. With some justification, many in the women's movement regarded the debate as an obscure exercise in Marxist pedantry. Yet critical issues were at stake, even if they generally went unrecognised.

In the first place, the domestic-labour debate attempted to put into theoretical context the contemporary feminist insight that child-bearing, child-care, and housework are material activities resulting in products, thus pointing to a materialist analysis of the basis for women's oppression. At the same time, the debate focused attention on the issues of women's position as housewives and of domestic labour's contribution to the reproduction of social relations. Various

17. Dalla Costa 1973, pp. 34, 47.
18. For a fine analysis of the campaign for wages for housework, see Malos 1978.
19. For useful recent summaries and critiques of the domestic-labour debate, see Holmstrom 1981, and Molyneux 1979. Important early critiques include Freeman 1973, and Gerstein 1973.

interpretations corresponded, more or less closely, to a variety of political and strategic perspectives on the relationship of women's oppression to class-exploitation and to revolutionary struggle, although theorists rarely stated these implications clearly, leaving political and strategic issues unconfronted. Finally, and perhaps most consequential for the development of theory, the domestic-labour debate employed categories drawn from *Capital*, thereby displaying confidence that women's oppression could be analysed within a Marxist framework.

At issue in the domestic-labour debate was the problem of how the commodity labour-power gets produced and reproduced in capitalist societies. Differences arose over the precise meaning and application of Marxist categories in carrying out an analysis of this problem. In particular, discussion centred on the nature of the product of domestic labour, on its theoretical status as productive or unproductive labour, and on its relationship to the wage and to work done for wages.

Many suggested, following Benston, that domestic labour produces use-values – useful articles that satisfy human wants of some sort – for direct consumption within the household. The consumption of these use-values enables family-members to renew themselves and return to work the next day; that is, it contributes to the overall maintenance and renewal of the working class. While various relationships were posited between this process of use-value production and capitalist production as a whole, the linkages remained somewhat vague. Others claimed, along with Dalla Costa, that domestic labour produces not just use-values but the special commodity known as labour-power. In this way, they seemed to tie women's unpaid household-labour more tightly to the workings of the capitalist mode of production, a position that many found, at first encounter, very attractive.

A particular position on the product of domestic labour naturally had some bearing, in the domestic-labour debate, on the view taken of the theoretical character of that labour. The notion that domestic labour creates value as well as use-value suggested to some, for example, that it could be categorised in Marxist terms as either productive or unproductive, meaning productive or unproductive of surplus-value for the capitalist class. For those who argued that domestic labour only produces use-values, no obvious Marxist category was at hand. Neither productive nor unproductive, domestic labour had to be something else.

Most of the initial energy expended in the domestic-labour debate focused on the question of whether domestic labour is productive or unproductive. Among those who followed the controversy, theoretical underdevelopment combined with a certain moralism and strategic opportunism to create a great deal of confusion. Again and again, the terms productive and unproductive, which Marx used as scientific-economic categories, were invested with moral overtones.

After all, to label women's work unproductive seemed uncharitable, if not downright sexist. Furthermore, the argument that unpaid labour in the household is productive suggested that women perform a certain amount of surplus-labour, which is expropriated from them by men for the benefit of capital. In this sense, women could be said to be exploited, sex-contradictions acquire a clear material basis, and housewives occupy the same strategic position in the class-struggle as factory-workers. For those wishing to reconcile commitments to both Marxism and feminism, this implication acted as a powerful magnet. Few participants in the women's movement or on the Left had the theoretical and political ability to grasp, much less propose, a convincing alternative.

Once the domestic-labour debate was underway, the problem of the relationship between wages and domestic labour emerged as an issue. For Marx, the wage represents the value of the commodity labour-power, a value that corresponds at any given historical moment to a socially-established normal level of subsistence. Participants in the domestic-labour debate pointed to difficulties created by Marx's formulation, and asked a number of questions about the role of domestic labour and household-structure in the establishment of the normal wage-level. For example, it was not clear in Marx's work whether the normal wage covers individuals or the entire household supported by a worker. In addition, the functioning of the wage as a type of articulation between domestic labour and the capitalist mode of production required investigation. Those who viewed domestic labour as value-producing proposed that the wage is the vehicle by which the value produced by women, and embodied in male wage-workers' labour-power, is transferred to the capitalist employer. Many also believed that women's unpaid domestic labour enables the capitalist class to pay less than the value of labour-power, that is, less than the normal level of subsistence. Some suggested that a non-working wife cheapens the value of male labour-power. Those who maintained that domestic labour produces use-value but not value attempted to identify the role of domestic labour in the reproduction of labour-power. Most participants in the debate also explored the possibility that certain tendencies immanent in capitalist development affect the performance of domestic labour and, therefore, wage-levels.

Several years after the domestic-labour debate began, certain questions could be said to be settled. As it turned out, it was relatively easy to demonstrate theoretically that domestic labour in capitalist societies does not take the social form of value-producing labour.[20] Benston's original insight that domestic labour

20. See Smith 1978, as well as Holmstrom 1981, and Molyneux 1979. For a recent revival of interest in the issues raised by the domestic-labour debate, see the essays collected in Fox (ed.) 1980.

produces use-values for direct consumption had been essentially correct. In the scientific sense, then, domestic labour cannot be either productive or unproductive, and women are not exploited as domestic labourers. At the same time, domestic labour is indispensable for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Just what domestic labour is, rather than what it is not, remained a problem only superficially addressed by participants in the domestic-labour debate. Some suggested it constitutes a separate mode of production which is outside the capitalist mode of production but subordinate to it. Others implied domestic labour is simply a special form of work within the capitalist mode of production. Most left the question unanswered. The problem of specifying the character of domestic labour, and issues concerning the wage and women's wage-work, now represent the central concerns of most theorists working with Marxist economic categories. As for politics and strategy, few today would use their analyses of the material foundation for women's oppression to draw easy conclusions about the role of women in revolutionary struggle.

Benston, Morton, Dalla Costa, and the participants in the domestic-labour debate set an important agenda for the study of women's position as housewives and the role of domestic labour in the reproduction of social relations. Their work proceeded, however, within severe limits which were not clearly identified. In the first place, they focused mainly on the capitalist mode of production. Second, they concentrated almost exclusively on domestic labour and women's oppression in the working class. Third, they generally restricted their analysis to the economic level. Fourth, they tended to identify domestic labour with housework and child-care, leaving the status of child-bearing undefined. Some of these limitations might have been defended as necessary steps in the development of a theoretical argument, but they rarely were. Although the discussion of domestic labour had been launched in response to the need for a materialist theory of women's oppression, its promise remained unfulfilled.

In any case, by the mid-1970s, socialist-feminist theorists were turning their attention to other questions. For example, the domestic-labour debate shed little light on the problem of whether housework is analytically the same in different classes within capitalist society, and even less on the theoretical status of domestic labour in non-capitalist societies. Socialist feminists also turned their attention to the child-bearing and child-rearing components of domestic labour, and investigated the problem of why domestic labour generally falls to women. Since women's oppression is not specific to capitalist societies, furthermore, many wondered how to reconcile its particular contemporary character with the fact that women have been subordinated for thousands of years. Similarly, they asked whether women are liberated in socialist countries, and if not, what obstacles hold them back. Finally, the relationship between the material pro-

cesses of domestic labour and the range of phenomena that make up women's oppression, especially those of an ideological and psychological nature, became a key issue. In general, these questions spoke more directly than the issues of the domestic-labour debate to the experience and political tasks of activists in the women's movement, and they quickly became the focus of socialist-feminist theorising.

While Juliet Mitchell had advised that 'we should ask the feminist questions, but try to come up with some Marxist answers', many socialist feminists began to disagree. They argued that the quest for Marxist answers to their questions led down a blind alley, where the feminist struggle became submerged in the socialist struggle against capitalism. Marxist theory, they believed, was incapable of incorporating the phenomenon of sex-differences. To move forward, then, socialist feminism had to take on the task of constructing an alternative framework using other theoretical categories. As Heidi Hartmann put it, 'if we think Marxism alone inadequate, and radical feminism itself insufficient, then we need to develop new categories'.[21]

Socialist feminists turned first to the radical feminism of the late sixties for a conceptual orientation that could address the depth and pervasiveness of women's oppression in all societies. Radical feminists typically considered male supremacy and the struggle between the sexes to be universal, constituting indeed, the essential dynamic underlying all social development. At the same time, some radical-feminist writings seemed to be extensions or deepenings of the insights offered by Marx and Engels. Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*,[22] for instance, claimed to go beyond the merely economic level addressed by Marx and Engels, in order to uncover the more fundamental problem of sex-oppression. 'The class analysis is a beautiful piece of work', Firestone wrote, 'but limited'. In proposing a dialectic of sex, she hoped 'to take the class analysis one step further to its roots in the biological division of the sexes. We have not thrown out the insights of the socialists; on the contrary, radical feminism can enlarge their analysis, granting it an even deeper basis in objective conditions and thereby explaining many of its insolubles'. Similarly, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*[23] acknowledged Engels as a major theorist, but her presentation of Engels's work transformed it almost beyond recognition into a subordinate contribution to what she called the sexual revolution. The limitation of Marxist theory, she maintained, was that it 'failed to supply a sufficient ideological base for a sexual revolution, and was

21. Mitchell 1971, p. 99; Hartmann 1979, p. 22.
22. Firestone 1970.
23. Millett 1970.

remarkably naive as to the historical and psychological strength of patriarchy'. In broad strokes, Millett depicted Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Freudian psychology as comparable instances of reactionary patriarchal policy and ideology, arguing that patriarchy will survive so long as psychic structures remain untouched by social programmes. For Millett, the sexual revolution requires not only an understanding of sexual politics but the development of a comprehensive theory of patriarchy.[24]

Firestone's and Millett's books, both published in 1970, had a tremendous impact on the emerging socialist-feminist trend within the women's movement. Their focus on sexuality, on psychological and ideological phenomena, and on the stubborn persistence of social practices oppressive to women struck a responsive chord. The concept of patriarchy entered socialist-feminist discourse virtually without objection. Those few critiques framed within a more orthodox-Marxist perspective, such as Juliet Mitchell's, went unheard. Although acknowledging the limitations of radical feminism, many socialist feminists, particularly in the United States, simply assumed that 'the synthesis of radical feminism and Marxist analysis is a necessary first step in formulating a cohesive socialist feminist political theory, one that does not merely add together these two theories of power but sees them as interrelated through the sexual division of labor'.[25] No longer was the problem one of using Marxist categories to build a theoretical framework for the analysis of women's oppression. Like the radical feminists, these socialist feminists took Marxism more or less as a given, and did not seek to elaborate or deepen it.

The task, then, was to develop the synthesis that is socialist feminism – or, as one writer put it, to dissolve the hyphen. To accomplish this task, socialist feminists explored two related concepts: patriarchy and reproduction. The notion of patriarchy, taken over from radical feminism, required appropriate transformation. Millett had used the term to indicate a universal system of political, economic, ideological, and above all, psychological structures through which men subordinate women. Socialist feminists had to develop a concept of patriarchy capable of being linked with the theory of class-struggle, which posits each mode of production as a specific system of structures through which one class exploits and subordinates another. In general, socialist feminists suggested, as Heidi Hartmann and Amy Bridges put it, that 'Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind; the categories of patriarchy as used by radical feminists are blind to history'. From this point of view, the concept of patriarchy provided a means

24. Firestone 1970, pp. 4, 12; Millett 1970, p. 169.
25. Eisenstein 1978, p. 6. For Mitchell's critique of radical feminism, see Mitchell 1971, pp. 82–96.

for discussing social phenomena that seem to escape Marxist categories. Some suggested that a theory of patriarchy could explain why certain individuals, men as well as women, are in particular subordinate or dominant places within the social structure of a given society. Others believed that issues of interpersonal dominance and subordination could best be addressed by a theory of patriarchy. Socialist-feminist theorists were not in agreement, moreover, on the meaning of the concept of patriarchy. For some, it represented a primarily ideological force or system. Many argued that it has a major material foundation in the ability of men to control women's labour, access to resources, and sexuality. 'Patriarchal authority', wrote Sheila Rowbotham, for example, 'is based on male control over the woman's productive capacity, and over her person'. Different approaches emerged also to the problems of the origin of divisions of labour by sex, and of the relationship between patriarchy and the workings of a particular mode of production.[26]

The concept of reproduction was invoked as a means of linking theoretically women's oppression and the Marxist analysis of production and the class-struggle. Socialist-feminist theorists analysed processes of reproduction as comparable to, but relatively autonomous from, the production that characterises a given society. Often, they talked in terms of a mode of reproduction, analogous to the mode of production. As with the concept of patriarchy, there was little agreement on the substantive meaning of the term reproduction. Some simply identified reproduction with what appear to be the obvious functions of the family. Despite the empiricism of this approach, it clarified the analytical tasks that socialist feminists confronted. In Renate Bridenthal's words, 'the relationship between production and reproduction is a dialectic within a larger historical dialectic. That is, changes in the mode of production give rise to changes in the mode of reproduction', and this dialectic must be analysed. Several participants in the domestic-labour debate postulated the existence of a 'housework-' or 'family-' mode of production alongside the capitalist mode of production, but subordinate to it. The concept of a mode of reproduction converged, moreover, with suggestions by Marxist anthropologists that families act as a perpetual source of cheap labour-power in both Third World and advanced capitalist countries. A similar concept of the mode of reproduction was often implicit in the work of socialist feminists who studied the relationship between imperialism and the family.[27]

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26. Hartmann and Bridges 1975, p. 14; Rowbotham 1973, p. 117. On dissolving the hyphen: Petchesky 1978. Early and influential socialist-feminist discussions of patriarchy include: Hartmann and Bridges 1975; Kelly-Gadol 1975–6; Rubin 1975.

27. Bridenthal 1976, p. 5. Mitchell used the concept of a mode of reproduction as early as 1966. Mitchell 1966, p. 21. For other examples, see: Gardiner 1976; Harrison 1973;

Recent socialist-feminist discussion has challenged the use of the notions of patriarchy and reproduction, arguing that existing theoretical efforts have failed to develop satisfactory ways of conceptualising either.[28] In the first place, neither patriarchy nor reproduction has been defined with any consistency. The concept of patriarchy often remains embedded in its radical-feminist origins as an essentially ideological and psychological system. Where it is used in a more materialist sense, it has not been adequately integrated into a Marxist account of productive relations. Problems in defining the concept of reproduction derive from its wide range of potential meanings. Felicity Edholm, Olivia Harris, and Kate Young suggest that three levels of analysis might be distinguished: social reproduction, or the reproduction of the conditions of production; reproduction of the labour-force; and human or biological reproduction.[29] While the suggestion has been helpful, the issue of the relationship among the different aspects remains.

A second theme in recent critiques is the problem of dualism. Again and again, theorists using the concepts of patriarchy and reproduction analyse women's oppression in terms of two separate structures; for example, capitalism and patriarchy, the mode of production and the mode of reproduction, the class-system and the gender-system. These 'dual-systems theories', as Iris Young terms them, imply that 'women's oppression arises from two distinct and relatively autonomous systems'. Because they fail to relate the systems in a coherent, non-mechanical way, dual-systems theories present a mysterious co-existence of disjunct explanations of social development. The duality generally recapitulates the opposition between feminism and Marxism that socialist-feminist theory had attempted to transcend. Veronica Beechey argues, for instance, that 'the separation of reproduction or patriarchy from other aspects of the mode of production has tended to leave the Marxist analysis of production untouched and uncriticised by feminist thinking'. Similarly, Young suggests that 'dual systems theory has not succeeded in confronting and revising traditional Marxist theory enough, because it allows Marxism to retain in basically unchanged form its theory of economic and social relations, to which it merely grafts on a theory of gender relations'.[30]

Larguia 1975; O'Laughlin 1975, pp. 365–6. In the context of the study of imperialism, a notion of the mode of reproduction is implicit in: Caulfield 1981; Deere 1976; Saffioti 1977. The anthropologist Claude Meillassoux has put forth the concept of families as perpetual sources of cheap labour-power, notably in Meillassoux 1977. Important reviews of Meillassoux, which discuss the concept of reproduction, include: Mackintosh 1977; O'Laughlin 1975; Rapp 1977.

28. Beechey 1980; Burris 1982; McDonough and Harrison 1978; Young 1981, and 1980. See also Barrett 1980, pp. 10–38, 126–8, and 131–8.

29. Edholm Harris and Young 1977.

30. Young 1980, pp. 170, 173–4; Beechey 1979, p. 78.

Furthermore, the problem is not just dualism. Socialist-feminist theory has focused on the relationship between feminism and socialism, and between sex- and class-oppression, largely to the exclusion of issues of racial or national oppression. At most, sex, race, and class are described as comparable sources of oppression, whose parallel manifestations harm their victims more or less equally. Strategically, socialist feminists call for sisterhood and a women's movement that unites women from all sectors of society. Nonetheless, their sisters of colour often express distrust of the contemporary women's movement and generally remain committed to activity in their own communities. The socialist-feminist movement has been unable to confront this phenomenon either theoretically or practically.

In short, despite the vitality of debate, socialist-feminist theorists have not yet been able to achieve their goal of developing a unified dialectical-materialist perspective on women's liberation.

Chapter Three

Socialist Feminism and the Woman-Question

A review of the theoretical work produced in the context of the socialist-feminist movement reveals many significant themes. Taken together, they indicate the important contribution made by socialist feminism to the development of theory on the question of women.

Socialist-feminist theory starts from an insistence that beneath the serious social, psychological, and ideological phenomena of women's oppression lies a material root. It points out that Marxism has never adequately analysed the nature and location of that root. And it hypothesises that the family constitutes a major if not the major terrain that nourishes it. With this position, socialist feminism implicitly rejects two fallacious, as well as contradictory, currents in the legacy of socialist theory and practice on the question of women. First, the socialist-feminist emphasis on the material root of oppression counters an idealist tendency within the Left, which trivialises the issue of women's oppression as a mere matter of lack of rights and ideological chauvinism. Second, socialist feminists' special concern with psychological and ideological issues, especially those arising within the family, stands opposed to the crudities of an economic-determinist interpretation of women's position, also common within the socialist movement. These perspectives – which make up the implicit theoretical content of the slogan 'the personal is political' – establish guidelines for the socialist-feminist consideration of women's oppression and women's liberation.

Socialist feminists recognise the inadequacies as well as the contributions of Engels's discussion of the family and property relations in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.[1] Like Engels, they locate the oppression of women within the dynamic of social development, but they seek to establish a more dialectical phenomenon as its basis than Engels was able to identify. Such a phenomenon must satisfy several implicit criteria. It must be a material process that is specific to a particular mode of production. Its identification should nevertheless suggest why women are oppressed in all class-societies – or, for some socialist feminists, in all known societies. Most important, it must offer a better understanding of women's oppression in subordinate as well as ruling classes than does Engels's critique of property. Socialist-feminist analyses share the view that child-bearing, child-raising, and housework fit these criteria, although they offer a wide variety of theoretical interpretations of the relationship between these activities and women's oppression.

Some socialist feminists try to situate domestic labour within broader concepts covering the processes of maintenance and reproduction of labour-power. They suggest that these processes have a material character, and that they can be analysed, furthermore, in terms of social reproduction as a whole. For elaboration of this position, which shifts the immediate theoretical focus away from women's oppression *per se*, and on to wider social phenomena, they turn to Marx's writings, and especially to *Capital*. At the same time, they resist, as best they can, the contradictory pulls of economic determinism and idealism inherited from the socialist tradition.

The relationship between the capitalist wage and the household it supports represents yet another major theme. Socialist feminists point out that Marxism has never been clear on the question of whom the wage covers. The concept of the historical subsistence level of wages refers, at times, to individuals, and at other times, to the worker 'and his family'. Recognition of this ambiguity has inspired a series of attempts to reformulate and answer questions concerning divisions of labour according to sex in both the family and wage-labour. While some such efforts stress concepts of authority and patriarchy, others focus on questions involving the determination of wage levels, competition in the labour-market, and the structure of the industrial reserve-army. Whatever the approach, the identification of the problem in itself constitutes a significant theoretical step forward.

Socialist-feminist theory also emphasises that women in capitalist society have a double relation to wage-labour, as both paid and unpaid workers. It generally regards women's activity as consumers and unpaid domestic labourers as the

1. Engels 1972.

dominant factor shaping every woman's consciousness, whether or not she participates in wage-labour. An important strategic orientation accompanies this view. Socialist feminists maintain, against some opinions on the Left, that women can be successfully organised, and they emphasise the need for organisations that include women from all sectors of society. In support of their position, they point to the long history of militant activity by women in the labour-movement, in communities, and in social revolution. They observe, moreover, that mobilisation demands a special sensitivity to women's experience as women, and they assert the legitimacy and importance of organisations comprised of women only. It is precisely the specific character of women's situation that requires their separate organisation. Here, socialist feminists frequently find themselves in opposition to much of the tradition of socialist theory and practice. Socialist-feminist theory takes on the essential task of developing a framework that can guide the process of organising women from different classes and sectors into an autonomous women's movement.

Finally, socialist-feminist theory links its theoretical outlook to a passage from Engels's preface to the *Origin*:

> According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other.[2]

The citation of these sentences, in article after article, accomplishes several purposes. It affirms the socialist-feminist commitment to the Marxist tradition. It suggests that Marx and Engels had more to say about the question of women than the later socialist movement was able to hear. It seems to situate the problem of women's oppression in the context of a theory of general social reproduction. It emphasises the material essence of the social processes for which women hold major responsibility. And it implies that the production of human beings constitutes a process that has not only an autonomous character, but a theoretical weight equal to that of the production of the means of existence. In short, Engels's remarks appear to offer authoritative Marxist backing for the socialist-feminist movement's focus on the family, sex-divisions of labour, and unpaid domestic work, as well as for its theoretical dualism and its strategic

2. Engels 1972, pp. 71–2.

commitment to the autonomous organisation of women. Yet the passage actually reflects Engels at his theoretical weakest. Socialist-feminist insights into the role of women in social reproduction need a more solid basis.

Despite the strengths, richness, and real contributions of socialist-feminist theoretical work, its development has been constrained by its practitioners' insufficient grasp of Marxist theory. With their roots in a practical commitment to women's liberation and to the development of a broad-based autonomous women's movement, participants in the socialist-feminist movement have only recently begun to explore their relationship to trends and controversies within the Left. At the theoretical level, the exploration has taken the form of several waves of publications seeking, on the one hand, to delineate the substance of socialist feminism more clearly, and on the other, to situate women's oppression more precisely within, rather than alongside, a Marxist theory of social reproduction.[3] These efforts are important, although they continue to suffer from an inadequate theoretical orientation. Socialist-feminist theory has not yet overcome its tendency to analyse women's oppression in dualistic terms as a phenomenon that is independent of class, race, and mode of production. Nor has socialist-feminist theory moved far enough away from its overemphasis on women's position within the family, and within ideological and psychological relations. The links, that is, between women's oppression, social production, and overall societal reproduction have yet to be established on a materialist basis. Most important, socialist-feminist theory has not been able to develop the theoretical underpinning for its strategic commitment to uniting women across such differences as class, race, age, and sexual orientation.

Socialist-feminist efforts to build on the socialist theoretical tradition have been hampered by the lack of an adequate foundation for the project. The socialist movement has left a perplexing and contradictory legacy. Even the writings of Marx and Engels, to which many socialist feminists turn for theoretical guidance, remain frustratingly opaque. A core of theoretical insight into the problem of women's oppression lies embedded, nonetheless, within the socialist tradition.

To the extent that the socialist movement directly addressed the issue of women's oppression, it focused on what it called 'the woman-question'. Originating in the nineteenth century, the term is extremely vague, and covers an assortment of important problems situated at distinct theoretical levels. Most

3. See, for example, the following collections: Eisenstein (ed.) 1978; Kuhn and Wolpe (eds.) 1978; Sargent (ed.) 1981. Important recent articles include: Barrett and McIntosh 1980; Beechey 1979, and 1977; Benería 1979; Blumenfeld and Mann 1980; Bujra 1978; Chinchilla 1980; Edholm, Harris and Young 1977; Holmstrom 1981; Humphries 1977; Kelly 1979; McIntosh 1979; Mackintosh 1979; Molyneux 1979; O'Laughlin 1975; Quick 1977, and 1980; Young 1981, and 1980.

generally, it has been used by socialists to refer to the issue of women's subordination in all historical societies. At times this subordination is specified in terms of women's differential role in the family, or in production. Most socialist considerations of the so-called woman-question focus on women's oppression and inequality in capitalist society, and the fight for equal rights. The term may also include, finally, personal relations between the sexes and among family-members, and sometimes extends to personal and non-work relations of all sorts. In short, the woman-question is not a precise analytical category, but a tangled knot of disparate strands. Three major strands have dominated theoretical work on the so-called woman-question: the family, women's work, and women's equality. Socialist theory has been unable, however, to weave these strands into a coherent perspective on the problem of women's liberation.[4]

Socialist feminists have subjected the socialist tradition of work on the woman-question to critical examination, seeking the kernels of serious theoretical and practical import stored within it. From this point of view, a major contribution of the socialist-feminist movement has been its insistence that those who use traditional categories of Marxist theory must make their case adequately. The questions that socialist feminists raise – concerning the roots of women's oppression, the persistence of sex-divisions of labour in all areas of social life, the meaning of women's liberation, and the organisation of the struggle against sexism and for socialism – require answers that go beyond what socialist theory has so far been able to provide. All indications suggest, furthermore, that the socialist theoretical legacy is not only unfinished but seriously flawed. An important task, then, is a rigorous re-examination of the texts of the socialist movement, starting with the work of Marx and Engels.

Modern students of the socialist movement often suggest that Marx and Engels produced virtually nothing of real usefulness about the oppression and liberation of women. Even less, it is implied, did they put their convictions concerning women's emancipation into practice. Yet these claims, whether openly stated or merely insinuated, are generally not firmly based in research. Indeed, they are often more the expressions of particular theoretical and political perspectives than they are serious considerations of the actual work of either Marx or Engels. Such statements reveal, therefore, the range and character of the widely held assumption that a theory of women's liberation cannot be based on Marxist categories.

Some take the lack of an important tradition of Marxist work on women's oppression to be entirely obvious. Mark Poster, a scholar of Marxism, laments, for instance, that 'Marx himself wrote almost nothing on the family', and that

4. Vogel 1979.

Marx and Engels 'relegated the family to the backwaters of the superstructure'.[5] More circumspectly, Richard Evans, a meticulous and sympathetic historian of the feminist and socialist movements, comments that 'Marx and his collaborator Engels had little to say about the emancipation of women . . . For them it was a marginal question; Marx himself barely alluded to it except to repeat, in a slightly modified form, Fourier's critique of marriage in an early unpublished manuscript and in the *Communist Manifesto*. There is also a brief passage on women in *Capital*, much quoted because it is all there is'.[6] The carelessness of these statements, made by otherwise scrupulous scholars, is surprising. Masked by the current interest in a feminist re-interpretation of Marxism, it suggests a certain prejudice against Marxism itself.

On a different tack, the observation that Marx and Engels were imprisoned within the limited and sexist horizons of their period provides a somewhat more secure basis for pessimism concerning their commitment to the liberation of women. Marx was, after all, not only a man but a Victorian husband and father with traditionally patriarchal attitudes in his own family-life. Engels, while more unconventional in his personal relationships, could hardly escape the sex-typed presumptions of nineteenth-century society. Both men participated in the largely all-male socialist and working-class movements of their time. These facts have led many, particularly activists in the women's movement, to conclude that Marx and Engels could never have transcended their male-chauvinist blinders to say or do anything useful on the woman-question. Marlene Dixon, for example, an influential militant in the women's movement and on the Left for more than ten years, has argued that the circumstance that Marx and Engels were men living in a particular historical context irrevocably blocked their ability to implement good intentions with respect to the woman-question. Moreover, she contends, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Marxists never adequately challenged their own bourgeois and sexist ideas concerning women, much less those of the (male) proletariat. As a result, the sexist bias in Marxism, originating with Marx himself, actually reinforced the oppression of socialist women and contributed to the growth of distortions of theory and strategy within the socialist movement.[7] Although Dixon herself might not go so far, the logical implication of this line

5. Poster 1978, pp. 42–3. Poster also declares that with the exception of Juliet Mitchell, 'feminists have in general not shed much light on family theory' (pp. xvii–xviii).

6. Evans 1977, p. 156. Meyer claims that *The German Ideology* was 'virtually the last pronouncement either Engels or Marx made about male-female relationships for four decades, except for the brief statements made in the *Principles of Communism* and the *Communist Manifesto*, both written in 1847, and the occasional references to the plight of female workers in *Capital*'. Indeed, 'the relative neglect of the "woman question" was built into Marxist theory' (Meyer 1977, pp. 89–90, 99). Even Eisenstein suggests that 'Marx never questioned the hierarchical sexual ordering of society' Eisenstein 1978, p. 9.

7. Dixon 1977, pp. 35–41.

of reasoning is that socialists who today seek to develop theory, strategy, and programme for women's liberation waste their time when they study Marx and Engels.

Despite its obvious limitations, many socialist feminists have searched the work of Marx and Engels for insights into the problem of women's subordination. They expect, not unreasonably, that the founders of the modern socialist tradition were able at least to suggest some general orientation. These efforts often end, nonetheless, in frustration and disappointment. Reluctantly, those who had hoped for more concrete theoretical and practical guidance conclude that Marx and Engels could only do so much. Charnie Guettel expresses the views of many in her pamphlet *Marxism and Feminism*. 'Just as Marx and Engels had no theoretical work on racism, a phenomenon that has become a central brake on progress in the working class movement in the stage of imperialism, so did they lack a developed critique of sexism under capitalism. Their class analysis of society still provides us with the best tools for analysing both forms of oppression, although concerning women it is very underdeveloped'.[8]

The indisputable failure of Marx and Engels to develop adequate tools and a comprehensive theory on women represents only part of the problem. The frustration many socialist feminists experience derives also from the fact that Marx and Engels did not say what these modern critics of the so-called woman-question want to hear. Or, to put it another way, today's questioners often ask, and try to answer, a different set of woman-questions.

Marx and Engels approached the issue of women's subordination and liberation from the point of view of an evolving socialist movement. They sought to situate the question within a theory of the essential mechanisms of social development as a whole, and therefore paid special attention to social relations of production. By contrast, contemporary socialist-feminist theorists and activists usually approach it from within the framework of the women's movement. They seek a theoretical perspective that will encompass both an understanding of how female persons come to be oppressed women and a comprehensive analysis of the elements required for women's total liberation. Despite its commitment to socialism, socialist feminism's different starting point often leads to a theoretical emphasis divergent from that of Marx and Engels.

While Marx and Engels focused on the oppression of women within given social relations of production, contemporary socialist-feminist theorists frequently try to disengage the issue of women's oppression from the study of the family and social reproduction. Juliet Mitchell complains, for example, that 'what is striking in [Marx's] later comments on the family is that the problem of

8. Guettel 1974, p. 15.

women becomes submerged in the analysis of the family – women, as such, are not even mentioned!' At the same time, she finds the analysis of Marx and Engels too narrow, and too dependent on what she sees as simplistic economic explanation. 'The position of women, then, in the work of Marx and Engels remains dissociated from, or subsidiary to, a discussion of the family, which is in its turn subordinated as merely a precondition of private property'.[9] These statements, originally formulated in 1966, reflect two widely held assumptions within the socialist-feminist movement: first, that women and the family constitute the sole possible objects of analysis, and that the category of woman, rather than the family, represents the appropriate object for women's liberationists; and second, that an adequate Marxist approach to the problem of women's oppression cannot be developed, even conditionally, at the level of relations of production.

Not surprisingly, it proves impossible to speak of women's oppression without some discussion of the family, and many socialist feminists focus on questions of gender-development and on relations between the sexes in the family, or, more generally, in society. These are often conceptualised in terms of inter-personal dynamics, ideology, and power-relations, while productive relations and issues of class tend to recede into the background. Then, when the works of Marx and Engels are studied for their contribution, they are found to be wanting. Contemporary theorists offer various explanations for the gaps, and move on quickly to alternative versions of a Marxist theory of the family and women's subordination. Yet what they have actually done is to substitute their own concerns and categories – a primary focus on psychology, on ideology, and on relations of hierarchy and authority – for those of Marx and Engels.

In sum, because they are asking different questions, however important, those socialist-feminist theorists and activists who today chide Marx and Engels for their failings often cannot hear what they actually said. And yet a substantial amount of the material is there, waiting to be developed. As a matter of fact, Marx and Engels had a great deal more to say of relevance to resolving the so-called woman-question than either socialists or women's liberationists have noticed. More precisely, Marx and Engels had a great deal to say, even if it was, nonetheless, nowhere near enough.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider the kinds of things a comprehensive approach to the problem of women's oppression ought to include. First, it must start from a firm commitment to the liberation of women and to the real social equality of all human beings. Second, it must make a concrete analysis of the current situation for women, as well as study how it arose. Third, it must present a theory of the position of women in society. That is, in addition to a

9. Mitchell 1971, pp. 78, 80.

history of women's position, it must also have a *theory*. Fourth, a comprehensive discussion of the situation of women must be informed by a vision of women's liberation in a future society that is consistent with its theory and history of women's subordination in past and present societies. Finally, and almost by definition, to ask the so-called woman-question is also to demand an answer, in terms of practical programme and strategy.

In their work, Marx and Engels addressed, at least partially, each of these aspects. The next three chapters review this work from a theoretical perspective that situates the problem of women's oppression in terms of the reproduction of labour-power and the process of social reproduction. Thus, each text is examined not only for its discussion of women, the family, or divisions of labour according to sex, but also for its consideration of problems and concepts associated with the reproduction of labour-power. From this point of view, certain concepts play an especially important role, and their development is followed carefully: individual consumption, the value of labour-power, the determination of wage-levels, surplus-population, and the industrial reserve-army. Over the years, furthermore, involvement in the working-class movements and political struggles of their time enabled Marx and Engels to modify and extend their positions in crucial ways. The writings are surveyed, therefore, in chronological order.

Part Two

Marx and Engels

Chapter Four
Early Views

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels arrived at a commitment to socialist politics, and to women's liberation as they understood it, by quite different routes. Marx, son of a lawyer, descendant of rabbis, and educated for a professional career, began from the perspective of a student of philosophy. By contrast, Engels, who was born into a securely established bourgeois family, started from his own experience as a clerk in the family textile-firm in Manchester, England, where he served the apprenticeship expected of a future German industrialist. Having set out separately, each man initially approached the problem of women's oppression in a distinctive way.

Marx's earliest comments on the question of women have a decidedly philosophical and symbolic tone. At the university, he had moved quickly from a youthful romanticism through Hegelianism to the more philosophical position taken by the group known as the Young Hegelians, intellectuals who sought to draw revolutionary-socialist conclusions out of Hegel's work. Not until somewhat later, after he began his collaboration with Engels, did Marx study economics seriously. Thus, like many nineteenth-century socialists, Marx at first does not so much confront the issue of women's actual subordination in social life as use it to symbolise the state of society in general.

In *On the Jewish Question*, published in 1843 when Marx was 25, and in the unpublished *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* written in 1844, Marx discusses the relationship between man and woman as

representative of the level of social development. Where relations of private property and possession dominate, 'the species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman, etc., becomes an object of trade! The woman is bought and sold.' More generally, the relation of man to woman constitutes the 'direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person . . . In this relationship, therefore, is *sensuously manifested*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which the human essence has become nature to man, or to which nature to him has become the human essence of man. From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development'. The relationship of man to woman reveals man's progress beyond a natural state, for it shows 'the extent to which . . . the *other* person as a person has become for him a need – the extent to which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being'. In a society based on private property, this relationship takes alienated forms, but a communist society will witness 'the return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his *human*, i.e. *social* existence'.[1] In these remarks, Marx's focus is on the individual 'man' [*Mensch*] – on the one hand standing generically for all human beings, but on the other bearing an unmistakable gender-identity. To the extent that she appears, woman, the other, reflects and is acted upon by man.

In *The Holy Family*, written shortly after the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in 1844 and published in 1845, Marx adopts the standpoint of Feuerbachian materialism in order now to argue against the radical idealism of the Young Hegelians. Despite the book's title, which refers ironically to the group, its dense and lengthy polemic does not touch on the issue of the family. However, in a few relevant passages, Marx significantly transforms his previous emphasis on the relation of man to woman. Freely paraphrasing Fourier, he observes that 'the change in a historical epoch can always be determined by women's progress toward freedom, because here, in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation'.[2] The focus in these remarks is now on woman's relation to man, and on women in general. As his new index of social development, Marx takes the position of woman, rather than the abstract relation of man to nature. Moreover, in *The Holy Family*, women's oppression becomes somewhat more than a

1. Marx 1975a, p. 172; Marx and Engels 1975b, pp. 295–6, 297.

2. Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 196, Marx claims he is quoting Fourier, yet in fact he very freely renders a passage in which Fourier makes a quite different point, arguing that 'the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress'. In other words, for Fourier the condition of women is the cause, not the index, of social progress. Beecher and Bienvenu (eds.) 1971, pp. 195–6. Alfred Meyer also notes the distinction between Fourier's statements and Marx's paraphrase in Meyer 1977, p. 86, n. 2. See also Okin 1979, p. 8.

symbolic representation in the realm of ideas. It is also a reality, and one that Marx contrasts, in scathing prose, to the hypocrisy of contemporary bourgeois notions about women. Indeed, he specifies that under current conditions 'the general position of woman in modern society is inhuman'.[3]

The nature of the tension between social reality and its ideological representation became a central concern for Marx less than a year later, as he developed a severely critical stance with respect to Feuerbachian materialism itself. In a set of 'notes hurriedly scribbled down for later elaboration, absolutely not intended for publication', Marx sketched his new perspective. According to Engels, who published these 1845 notes in 1888 as *Theses on Feuerbach*, 'they are invaluable as the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook'.[4] Here, it is of interest that Marx uses the family and its contradictory internal relations to illustrate one of the theses:

> That the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice.[5]

Almost accidentally, then, this thesis reveals Marx's initial programmatic orientation toward the family: it must 'be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice . . . [It must] be destroyed in theory and in practice'.[6]

Engels's first examination of woman's position in society appears in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, written in late 1844 and early 1845, and published in May 1845. In contrast to the highly abstract approach taken during this period by Marx, Engels's orientation is largely descriptive and historical. He focuses on the actual experience of working-class women, members of the small but growing industrial and agricultural proletariat. He insists that it is not the invention of machines but capitalism itself, with its drive for accumulation

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3. Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 195.
4. Engels 1967, p. 8.
5. Marx 1975c, p. 4. In the 1888 publication, Engels modified Marx's wording of the second two sentences: 'The latter must itself, therefore, first be understood in its contradiction and then, by the removal of the contradiction, revolutionized in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and transformed in practice': Engels (ed.) 1975a, p. 7. Rather than a 'softening' of Marx's version, as Draper suggests, the change represents an attempt to indicate more clearly what Marx and Engels later saw to be the relationship between theory and practice. Draper 1972, p. 89, n. 19.
6. Marx 1975c, p. 4.

and profit, that makes the cheap labour of women and children attractive to employers. Methodically surveying the development and present state of various spheres of production, he documents the details of the lives of working-class women – as workers and as wives, mothers, and daughters. At the same time, his remarks offer a general overview of the situation of working-class women, as well as some insights of an essentially theoretical character.

To Engels, the most obvious effects of factory-work on women are physical and moral. Long hours and ghastly working and living conditions render women-workers vulnerable to severe bone deformations and diseases. Women-workers have a high rate of miscarriages. Child-birth is exceptionally difficult. Fear of loss of wages or dismissal forces pregnant workers to stay at their jobs to the last moment. 'It is quite common for women to be working in the evening and for the child to be delivered the following morning, and it is by no means uncommon for babies to be born in the factory itself among the machinery'. For the same reasons, few are able to stay home after the birth of a child for more than a week or two. 'It is often only two or three days after confinement that a woman returns to the factory, and of course, she cannot take the baby with her. When there is a break in the factory routine she has to rush home to feed the infant and get her own meal'. As might be expected, the babies are weak; perhaps 50 percent of working-class children never reach their fifth birthday. In general, children in the factory districts tend to be 'pale and scrofulous', 'weak and stunted'. Menstruation often begins late, or not at all.[7]

Such conditions are, according to Engels, literally demoralising. In nineteenth-century fashion, he castigates the moral evils of factory-work, where 'members of both sexes of all ages work together in a single room'. While we may smile at his relatively archaic standards of morality, Engels nevertheless points to real problems: seduction of girls by employers under threat of dismissal, unwanted pregnancy, drunkenness and alcoholism, suicide, general lack of education, and a high level of crime and interpersonal brutality. Moreover, widespread prostitution accompanied the 'appalling degree of demoralisation' characteristic of the working class Engels describes.[8]

The enormous surge of prostitution in the nineteenth century drew the attention of moral reformers and Utopian socialists of every stripe, who repeatedly pointed to it as a shocking cultural symbol of modern social degradation. Marx himself follows this tradition when, in a footnote in the *Economic and Philo-*

7. Engels 1968, pp. 182, 161, 184, 226. This translation has been the subject of much criticism; see, for example, Marcus 1974, pp. xi–xiii, 28–9. In the interest of readability, I follow Marcus in citing it nonetheless. For the authorised translation by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky, see Engels 1975b, 4, pp. 295–596.

8. Engels 1968, pp. 166, 134. More generally, see pp. 124–9, 166–8.

sophic Manuscripts, he reduces prostitution to a rhetorical metaphor of exploitation. 'Prostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *laborer*, and since it is a relationship in which falls not the prostitute alone, but also the one who prostitutes – and the latter's abomination is still greater – the capitalist, etc., also comes under this head'.[9] Marx's denunciation, in *The Holy Family*, of liberal philanthropic notions of reform and redemption treats prostitution only a little more specifically, as the paradigm of bourgeois ideological hypocrisy.[10] But it is Engels, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, who analyses the reality and the social roots of that particular hypocrisy. Despite a certain Victorian ring, his indictment of the bourgeoisie reveals a fine comprehension of both social forces and individual options:

> While burdening the workers with numerous hardships the middle classes have left them only the two pleasures of drink and sexual intercourse. The result is that the workers, in order to get something out of life, are passionately devoted to these two pleasures and indulge in them to excess and in the grossest fashion. If people are relegated to the position of animals, they are left with the alternatives of revolting or sinking into bestiality. Moreover the middle classes are themselves in no small degree responsible for the extent to which prostitution exists – how many of the 40,000 prostitutes who fill the streets of London every evening are dependent for their livelihood on the virtuous bourgeoisie? How many of them were first seduced by a member of the middle classes, so that they now have to sell their persons to passers-by in order to live? Truly, the middle classes are least entitled to accuse the workers of sexual licence.[11]

From all this, Engels draws the stark conclusion that 'family life for the worker is almost impossible under the existing social system'. Again and again he looks at prevailing conditions and finds 'the dissolution of family ties', and 'the universal decadence of family life among the workers'. Again and again he notes that 'these faults are due entirely to existing social conditions'. More specifically, Engels points to the employment of married women in factory-work. 'If a married woman works in a factory family life is inevitably destroyed and in the present state of society, which is based upon family life, its dissolution has the most demoralising consequences both for parents and children'. The problem is not just the work itself. Long hours and terrible living, as well as working, conditions, take a heavy toll in 'endless domestic troubles and family quarrels'. Moreover, 'if a woman works for twelve or thirteen hours a day in a factory and her husband

9. Marx 1975b, 295n.
10. Marx and Engels 1975b, pp. 166–76.
11. Engels 1968, p. 144.

is employed either in the same establishment or in some other works, what is the fate of the children?' So far as Engels could see in England in 1844, capitalism, unless blocked by the united action of the working class, promised a succession of generations faced with the same conditions: 'Pregnant women working until the hour of their confinement, lack of skill as housewives, the neglect of household duties, the neglect of the children, indifference to – even hostility towards – family life, and general social demoralisation'.[12]

Women sometimes became the main earner in working-class households, and this epitomised, to Engels, the apparent tendency toward family-dissolution. Confused as well as struck by this trend, he experienced it as a 'complete reversal of normal social relationships', and therefore a betrayal of the 'normal structure of the family'. In shocked tones, he observes that 'very often the fact that a married woman is working does not lead to the complete disruption of the home but to a reversal of the normal division of labor within the family. The wife is the breadwinner while her husband stays at home to look after the children and do the cleaning and cooking . . . Family relationships are reversed, although other social conditions remain unchanged'. Such a situation 'deprives the husband of his manhood and the wife of all womanly qualities . . . It is a state of affairs shameful and degrading to the human attributes of the sexes'. In the same vein, Engels lists among child-labour's 'evil consequences' the possibility that 'the children become emancipated and regard their parents' house merely as lodgings, and quite often, if they feel like it, they leave home and take lodgings elsewhere'.[13]

Engels's comments on the dissolution of the family, which emphasise the supposedly natural character of divisions of labour and authority according to sex or age, and misconstrue the effects of their reversal, reflect conventional nineteenth-century assumptions. Engels fails, at this point, to recognise the possibility of a contemporary form of family-life other than that established by the bourgeoisie, and therefore declares the working-class family to be in a state of disintegration. He senses the contradictory character of his remarks, however, and seeks to root them in historical development. If the present state of the working-class family seems to be unnatural, it must result from 'some radical error in the original relationship between men and women. If the rule of the wife over her husband – a natural consequence of the factory system – is unnatural, then the former rule of the husband over the wife must also have been unnatural'. Indeed, these observations permit Engels a glimpse not only into the past but into the future as well. 'Such a state of affairs shows clearly that there is no rational or sensible principle at the root of our ideas concerning family income and prop-

12. Engels 1968, pp. 145, 160, 161, 225.
13. Engels 1968, pp. 160, 161, 163, 236.

erty. If the family as it exists in our present-day society comes to an end then its disappearance will prove that the real bond holding the family together was not affection but merely self-interest engendered by the false concept of family property'.[14]

In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels also makes three genuine theoretical contributions to an understanding of the situation of women, each, as he later observed, in embryonic form.[15] First, he implicitly recognises that neither individuals nor the family exist as ahistorical abstractions. Focusing throughout the book on working-class people and the working-class family, he often contrasts their experience with bourgeois expectations and relationships. Furthermore, he links, however vaguely and inconsistently, the nature of relations between the sexes in the family to social forms of property holding. In short, Engels suggests that women's oppression and the family must be conceptualised in terms of specific modes of production and specific classes.

Second, Engels considers the determination and structure of the wage – the means by which individual and family ensure their own reproduction. He argues that two types of competition affect the level of the wage. Exceptionally, in periods of full employment or even job-surplus, employers must compete among themselves for labour, and wages of course rise. More normally, competition among workers for available jobs tends to force wages down. Nevertheless, there are limits in the play of these forces of labour-supply and demand. Different categories of workers require different living standards and therefore command different wages, under even the severest competition. Wages must be 'high enough to maintain the living standards of the worker at a level appropriate to the job'. Moreover, wages must be high enough for workers to replace themselves, although again within definite limits. In the case of factory-labour, for example, it is 'in the interests of the middle classes that factory wages should be high enough to enable the workers to bring up their children, who will in due course be fit for regular industrial employment. On the other hand, the worker's wages must be low enough to force him to send his children to the factory rather than encourage them to improve their lot by training for something better than mere factory labor'.[16]

The number of earners in a household affects the level of the wage. 'When an entire family is working the wages of the individual can be cut down'. In this way, the greedy bourgeoisie has 'craftily succeeded in depressing men's wages'

14. Engels 1968, pp. 164–5. Engels also briefly discusses the dissolution of the family under the impact of the factory-system in his *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* (1843–44); see Engels 1975c, pp. 423–4.
15. Engels 1968, pp. 363–4.
16. Engels 1968, p. 90.

by requiring the work of wives and children in factories. In practice, Engels observes, wage-rates have to correspond to some assumption about the average number of earners within the household. In general, however, wages cannot fall below the 'something a little more than nothing' defined by Engels as the 'minimum' required for physical subsistence. From here, Engels attempts to determine the relationship between this 'minimum' wage and the 'average' wage in normal times, that is, when there is no unusual competition among either workers or capitalists. 'In such a state of equilibrium wages will be a little more than the "minimum". The extent to which the level of the "average" wage is above that of the "minimum" wage depends upon the standard of living and the level of culture of the workers'. Although this formulation takes a hypothetical physical minimum as a standard, it broadly anticipates Marx's later emphasis in *Capital* that 'a historical and moral element' plays a critical part in the determination of all wage-levels. In these passages, then, Engels has sketched the outlines of a theory of the relationship between wages and the working-class family: the level of wages is as much a social as a physical issue; wages cover the reproduction of the working class by supporting households, not individuals; capitalists can therefore force wages down by drawing more household-members into wage-labour; such a depreciation of the value of an individual's work may require a significant alteration in what Engels terms 'the standard of living and the level of culture of the workers'.[17]

Engels's third theoretical insight concerns the overall reproduction of the working class, specifically, the relationship between population and capitalism. He observes that the cyclical nature of capitalist development regulates the size of the total work force at any given moment. 'English industry must always have a reserve of unemployed workers'. Ordinarily, this massive 'superfluous population' competes for the available jobs. At the peak of a boom, however, the existing population suddenly appears insufficient, and must be supplemented. Labourers from outlying agricultural districts and even from Ireland, as well as women and young people, enter the work force. 'These groups of workers differ from the main body inasmuch as it is only at times of exceptionally good trade that they realise that they are in fact part of the reserve army of labor'. In opposition to Malthus, then, Engels emphasises the structural necessity of a so-called surplus-population for industrial expansion. Malthus 'was wrong when

17. Engels 1968, pp. 90–2. In 1885, Engels observed that 'the thesis that the "natural", i.e. normal, price of labour-power coincides with the minimum wage, i.e., with the equivalent in value of the means of subsistence absolutely indispensable for the life and procreation of the worker, was first put forward' in his *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* (1843–4) and in *Condition*. Still, he adds, the 'thesis is nevertheless incorrect . . . In *Capital* Marx has put the above thesis right'. Marx 1975d, p. 125. For the *Outlines*, see Engels 1975c.

he expressed the view that more people existed than could be fed from available resources. The real reason for the existence of the superfluous population is the competition of the workers among themselves'. Engels thereby links the phenomenon of surplus-population to the same processes that regulate wages and the length of the working day. The difference is simply that they take place 'on a much larger scale [and] in the country as a whole'.[18]

By 1845, Marx and Engels had arrived, on different paths, at a provisional understanding of what was to become known as the materialist theory of history, or historical materialism. Between November 1845 and August 1846, they produced a long manuscript entitled *The German Ideology*. As Marx later recalled, they 'decided to set forth together our conception as opposed to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience'. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy. Although never published in full, the manuscript 'achieved our main purpose – self-clarification'.[19] *The German Ideology* marks a turning point in the development of Marx and Engels's work. It also contains their first comprehensive formulation of a theory and history of the family.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels take the opportunity to explore several aspects of the relationships among family, ideology, and social reproduction. They call attention to the contradiction between ideological conceptions of the family and the actual historical experience of families in different classes. In the bourgeoisie, the family acts as a property-transmitting unit whose existence 'is made necessary by its connection with the mode of production'. The bourgeoisie develops an idealised concept of the family which it nevertheless betrays in its every action. In the bourgeois family, 'boredom and money are the binding link, [yet] its dirty existence has its counterpart in the holy concept of it in official phraseology and universal hypocrisy'. Marx and Engels claim that, in contrast, the family is '*actually* abolished' in the proletariat, where 'the concept of the family does not exist at all, but here and there family affection based on extremely real relations is certainly to be found'. In sum, Marx and Engels draw the explicit theoretical lesson that 'one cannot speak at all of the family "*as such*"'.[20]

18. Engels 1968, pp. 92–8; see also pp. 320–4.
19. Marx 1970a, p. 22.
20. Marx and Engels 1975a, pp. 180–1. Marx and Engels do not say why they think the proletarian family has been abolished. Presumably, the statement rests on the absence of property and on observations of the type made by Engels in *Condition*. In a review appearing in 1850 of a book by Georg Friedrich Daumer, Marx and Engels make a similar argument against viewing women in abstraction from their social situation – Marx and Engels 1975c, pp. 244–6.

How, then, can one speak of the family? Marx and Engels view it as a social form rooted in relations of production, for 'life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things'. They identify three simultaneous aspects of social activity that respond to these requirements. First, people produce means to satisfy basic needs. Second, this very act leads to the creation of new needs. And third, 'men, who daily re-create their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*'. In this section of *The German Ideology*, the family has the theoretical status of a site of reproduction of individuals whose essential characteristic is that they participate in social-labour. The relationship between the biological or 'natural', and the social on this site – that is, in the family – remains highly ambiguous. For instance, a well-known passage in *The German Ideology* asserts that 'the production of life, both of one's own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation – social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end'.[21]

Using the concept of the division of labour – which often plays the role, in *The German Ideology*, of a motivating force – Marx and Engels sketch the outlines of a history of the family in social development. The division of labour 'was originally nothing but the division of labour in the sexual act'. Out of it arises the 'natural' division of labour in the family. Stages in the development of the division of labour correspond, moreover, to different forms of property. At first, in the stage of tribal property, the division of labour is 'still very elementary and is confined to a further extension of the natural division of labor existing in the family'. Initially the family 'is the only social relation', but in the long run, as 'increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, [it becomes] a subordinate one'.[22]

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels also comment briefly on the family in communist society. They are examining the relationship between forms of social organisation and the state of development of productive forces. Early agricultural societies, they note, were characterised by 'individual economy' and could not develop along communal lines. 'The abolition [*Aufhebung*] of individual economy, which is inseparable from the abolition of private property, was impossible for the simple reason that the material conditions required were not present'. Then, almost as an afterthought, they note that it is obvious that 'the supersession [*Aufhebung*] of individual economy is inseparable from the super-

21. Marx and Engels 1975a, pp. 41–3.
22. Marx and Engels 1975a, pp. 33, 43, 44, 46.

session of the family'.[23] For the first time in their work, Marx and Engels here touch on the utopian-socialist theme of the abolition of the family.

Marx and Engels now had the firm beginnings of both a theory and a history of the issues involved in the problem of women's subordination. Marx summed up the general theoretical insight in a letter to the Russian liberal Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov. 'Assume particular stages of development in production, commerce and consumption and you will have a corresponding social constitution, a corresponding organisation of the family, of orders or of classes, in a word, a corresponding civil society'.[24] From a theoretical point of view, in other words, all social relations can ultimately be rooted in the relations of production dominant in a given society. As for empirical material concerning the history of women and the family, it was still quite scarce, but Marx and Engels had already been able to piece together a fair sketch of the historical development.

With the 'new world outlook' consolidated in the writings of 1845–46, Marx and Engels found themselves confronting new tasks. A wave of re-awakened democratic aspirations and intensified political activity was sweeping across Europe, triggered by the economic crisis of 1847 and culminating in the revolutions of 1848–50. Practical organisational work, first with the Communist Correspondence Committee and then with the Communist League, became paramount. When the newly formed Communist League required a theoretical and practical platform, Marx and Engels were asked to draft it. Two preparatory versions, both by Engels, survive. An initial *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith*, written in the question-and-answer format commonly used at the time by workers' organisations, was discussed at the First Congress of the Communist League in London in June 1847. In late October, Engels produced an improved version, the *Principles of Communism*, also in the form of a revolutionary catechism. By November 1847 it was clear that the question and answer format conflicted with the historical approach, and Engels suggested to Marx that they drop the catechism form.[25] The result, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, was written between December 1847 and January 1848, on the instructions of the Second Congress of the Communist League. In its pages, as well as in the drafts, Marx and Engels recast their views on the issue of women's subordination into a more programmatic, and frequently quite striking, form.

Having grasped the mechanisms underlying historical development, Marx and Engels were able to link past, present, and future phenomena with a new, if still rather unsubtle, clarity. Thus Engels observes in the *Confession of Faith* that 'the

23. Marx and Engels 1975a, pp. 75–6.
24. Marx to P. V. Annenkov, 28 December 1846, in Marx and Engels 1965, p. 35.
25. Engels to Marx, 23–24 November 1847 in Marx and Engels 1965, p. 45.

family relationship has been modified in the course of history by the property relationship and by periods of development, and . . . consequently the ending of private property will also have a most important influence on it'. More dramatically, the *Manifesto* delineates the relationship between family and property in capitalist society. The bourgeois family is based 'on capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution'. Since the working class lacks property, the proletarian's 'relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with bourgeois family relations'. At the ideological level, the *Manifesto* claims, with a dramatic flourish, that 'the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation'.[26]

Communists argued that such relations within families, as well as prostitution, are natural products of bourgeois society. In addition, they had to respond to the bourgeois accusation that they intended to collectivise women, that is, turn them into prostitutes. In the *Principles of Communism*, Engels is terse and analytic:

> Community of women is a relationship that belongs altogether to bourgeois society and is completely realised today in prostitution. But prostitution is rooted in private property and falls with it. Thus instead of introducing the community of women, communist organisation puts an end to it.[27]

Still, no issue so inflamed and frightened the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, for, as Sheila Rowbotham compellingly argues, 'the prostitute became the symbol of [its] class and sex guilt'.[28] The question of prostitution takes a much greater place in *The Communist Manifesto* than in the two preparatory drafts. In passionate terms, Marx and Engels denounce the bourgeoisie's small-minded ignorance and ideological hypocrisy:

> But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the whole bourgeoisie in chorus.
>
> The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.
>
> He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.

26. Engels 1975d, pp. 102–3; Marx and Engels 1975d, pp. 501, 494, 487.
27. Engels 1975e, p. 354.
28. Rowbotham 1972, p. 65.

> For the rest, nothing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which, they pretend, is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial.[29]

The *Manifesto* also situates the future of marriage and of relations between the sexes with respect to the prevailing mode of production. 'The abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private'. More specifically, 'the bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement [public prostitution and the disintegrating working-class family] vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital'.[30] In contrast to these fairly cryptic remarks, Engels's draft versions are in places more explicit. The *Confession of Faith*, for example, argues that communist society would be able, if necessary, to 'interfere in the personal relationship between men and women or with the family in general to the extent that the maintenance of the existing institution would disturb the new social order'.[31] In *Principles of Communism*, Engels revises this position:

> *Question 21*: What influence will the communist order of society have upon the family?
> *Answer*: It will make the relation between the sexes a purely private relation which concerns only the persons involved, and in which society has no call to interfere. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, thus destroying the twin foundation of hitherto existing marriage – the dependence through private property of the wife upon the husband and of the children upon the parents.[32]

What seems, here, to be an about-face, may, in fact, be a clarification. Engels now differentiates among types of societal intervention. Abolition of private property and communal education beginning at the earliest possible age strike at the heart of capitalist society. Having thus drastically intervened, a communist society can, Engels feels, safely leave other relations between the sexes alone.

These draft formulations recall typical nineteenth-century socialist positions concerning the abolition of the family. While their omission from the *Manifesto* leaves the issue frustratingly open, Marx and Engels evidently concluded that a more precise and less utopian statement referring to the abolition of *both* the

29. Marx and Engels 1975d, p. 502.
30. Marx and Engels 1975d, p. 501.
31. Engels 1975d, p. 102.
32. Engels 1975e, p. 354.

bourgeois and the proletarian family better represented their position. In this way, to the bourgeoisie's charge that communists seek the destruction of 'the family "*as such*"', they quite properly replied that communists fight for the abolition of classes as embodied in the specific institutions – here, the bourgeois and the working-class family – of class-society.

Marx and Engels also refer very briefly, in the *Manifesto*, to the problem of the structure of the wage with respect to the household. In an analytic mode, they observe that 'the less the skill and exertion of strength implied in manual labour, in other words, the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labour of men superseded by that of women. Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age and sex'. This foundation laid, they proclaim dramatically that 'all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour'.[33]

Marx addressed the theoretical questions surrounding the wage more directly in a set of lectures delivered at the time of the writing of the *Manifesto*, and published sixteen months later as *Wage Labour and Capital*. He observes that with the development of capitalism, competition increases and wages fall. Furthermore, the introduction of machinery has the effect of 'replacing skilled workers by unskilled, men by women, adults by children', thereby generally depreciating the value of labour-power and changing the structure of the household's income. When, for example, the factory employs three children and a woman in place of a man discharged because of the machine, 'now four times as many workers' lives are used up in order to gain a livelihood for *one* worker's family'. At the same time, Marx confronts the difficult question of the determination of wage-levels. Wages, or the 'wage minimum', are the price of 'the cost of existence and reproduction of the worker'. Marx cautions, however, that the concept of a wage-minimum pertains to the working class as a whole. 'This wage minimum, like the determination of the price of commodities by the cost of production in general, does not hold good for the *single individual* but for the *species*. Individual workers, millions of workers, do not get enough to be able to exist and reproduce themselves; *but the wages of the whole working class* level down, within their fluctuations, to this minimum'. While still holding to the notion of a hypothetical minimum-wage, Marx recognises its essentially aggregate and social character.[34]

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33. Marx and Engels 1975d, pp. 491, 502.

34. In a notebook labelled 'Wages' kept at the same time, Marx also noted that the supposed minimum wage 'is different in different countries' and 'has a historical movement'. Indeed, at times it includes 'a little tea, or rum, or sugar and meat'. These comments echo Engels's on the 'level of culture' discussed above, as well as foreshadowing Marx's own more developed theory. Marx 1975e, pp. 425–6, 436.

In their early writings, Marx and Engels evidence a commitment to the importance of the problem of the oppression of women. They dissect, to the extent the available empirical material allowed, the hard facts of women's subordination in past and present society. Against this ugly picture, they counterpose a serious, if somewhat simplistic vision of women's liberation in the future, and of the abolition of the family as it exists in class-society. Although their strategic approach hardly matches the scope of this vision, its programmatic weakness reflects the level of development of the working-class movement at the time. In their theoretical views, Marx and Engels begin to distinguish their position on the question of women from the imprecision and utopianism of earlier socialist opinions.

In the next decades, both Marx and Engels sought to elaborate the theoretical, as well as the programmatic, aspects of their perspective. Insofar as they continued their emphasis on the division of labour according to sex, on the oppression of proletarian women at work, and on the supposed dissolution of the working-class family, they set the terms within which the so-called woman-question was to be discussed and acted upon by socialists for the next hundred years. At the same time, they deepened their understanding of women's oppression as a structural element of the overall reproduction of the working class and of general social reproduction. In this sense, they began to move toward a broader theoretical and practical approach to achieving the goal of women's liberation.

Chapter Five
Marx: the Mature Years

By 1850, the series of insurrections that had inspired democratic and revolutionary hopes across the European continent was checked. Encouraged by an upward turn in the economic cycle, counter-revolutionary régimes sought to re-assert the power of the propertied. Marx and Engels, the leading spokesmen of the Communist League, soon became major targets of reactionary governmental ire. Hounded from the continent, they took refuge in England: Engels to Manchester, where he took a position in his father's textile-firm, and Marx to London, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Marx now began his economic studies anew, deciding 'to start again from the very beginning and to work carefully through the new material'.[1] Between 1857 and 1858 he consolidated his notes in a manuscript known today as the *Grundrisse*. While many formulations in the *Grundrisse* remain incorrect or imprecise from the point of view of the works later prepared for actual publication, the manuscript shows how far Marx's studies had brought him. It presents his first mature attempt 'to lay bare', as he was to phrase it ten years later in the preface to *Capital*, 'the economic law of motion of modern society'. And it includes some comments broadly relevant to the issues of women's subordination and liberation.

Because Marx strives to understand the capitalist mode of production as a whole, he returns again and

1. Marx 1970a, p. 23.

again in the *Grundrisse* to the problem of the relationships among production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. In this way he addresses the issue of the reproduction, within definite relations, of individuals by means of the consumption of products. 'Consumption reproduces the individual himself in a specific mode of being, not only in his immediate quality of being alive, and in specific social relations. So that the ultimate appropriation by individuals taking place in the consumption process reproduces them in the original relations in which they move within the production process and towards each other; reproduces them in their social being, and hence reproduces their social being – society – which appears as much the subject as the result of this great total process'.[2] This very general statement underscores the inseparability of the reproduction of individuals from overall social reproduction, even if it lacks specificity with respect to class-membership.

Elsewhere in the *Grundrisse*, Marx focuses on the reproduction of individuals as direct producers in the capitalist mode of production, that is, as members of the working class. The individual worker possesses a commodity, the capacity to labour, that the capitalist needs to set the production-process in motion. On the market, the worker exchanges this commodity 'for money, for the general form of wealth, but only in order to exchange this again for commodities, considered as the objects of his immediate consumption, as the means of satisfying his needs'.[3] The wages paid to the worker by the capitalist represent the amount of labour embodied in these commodities bought for immediate consumption.

Wage-levels fluctuate. In general, they correspond to 'the objectified labour necessary bodily to maintain not only the general substance in which [the worker's] labor power exists, i.e. the worker himself, but also that required to modify this general substance so as to develop its particular capacity'. When business is good, needs and consumption – the worker's 'share of civilization' – expand. In the long run, capital's drive for accumulation has the tendency to permit the worker to augment and replace 'natural' needs with 'historically created' ones. It is this element of flexibility that distinguishes the wage-worker from the serf or slave, for 'he is neither bound to particular objects, nor to a particular manner of satisfaction. The sphere of his consumption is not qualitatively restricted, only quantitatively'.[4]

So long as Marx examines the immediate production-process, as in these remarks on wages, he treats the worker as a sort of 'perennial subject and not yet as a mortal individual of the working species'. At this level, 'we are not yet dealing with the working class, i.e. the replacement for wear and tear so that it

2. Marx 1973b, p. 717n.
3. Marx 1973b, p. 283.
4. Marx 1973b, pp. 282–3, 287, 325, 283.

can maintain itself as a class'.[5] Once the analysis turns to capital-accumulation, however, the problem of the aggregate reproduction of the working class comes into clearer focus. Marx approaches it by means of a critique of Thomas Robert Malthus's theory of over-population.

Malthus makes two serious errors, according to Marx. First, he fails to recognise that the determination of population proceeds according to qualitative and quantitative relations specific to a given mode of production. 'He transforms the immanent, historically changing limits of the human reproduction process into *outer barriers*; and the *outer barriers* to natural reproduction into *immanent limits* or *natural laws* of reproduction'. Second, Malthus argues that a fixed quantity of necessaries can sustain only a given number of people, when he should have analysed the social relations enabling individuals to acquire means of subsistence. In capitalist societies, for example, a person must have employment to obtain money to buy necessaries. More generally, the question is the '*social mediation* as such, through which the individual gains access to the means of his reproduction and creates them'.[6]

Overpopulation therefore has a characteristic form in the capitalist mode of production. The surplus-population represents a surplus of 'labor capacities', and is made up of workers rather than non-workers. In general, the absolute size of the working class tends to grow as capital accumulates. At the same time, capital's need to develop the productive forces causes a continual decrease in the proportion of necessary to surplus-labour which 'appears as increase of the relatively superfluous laboring capacities – i.e. as the positing of surplus population'. To the extent that a portion of this surplus-population is sustained as a 'reserve for later use', all classes pay the costs. In this way, 'Mr. Capitalist . . . shifts a part of the reproduction costs of the working class off his own shoulders and thus pauperizes a part of the remaining population for his own profit'.[7]

Far from embodying an abstract law of nature, overpopulation in the form of a relative-surplus of workers – what Engels had called the reserve-army of labour – is inherent in capitalist relations of production. Its actual character at any given time responds to the contradictory tendencies of capital to both increase the labouring population absolutely and render a growing portion of it relatively superfluous. In short, 'all the contradictions which modern population theory expresses as such, but does not grasp', emerge from the phenomenon of surplus-value.[8] With these observations, Marx suggests an intimate theoretical

5. Marx 1973b, p. 323.
6. Marx 1973b, pp. 604–8; quotations on p. 607.
7. Marx 1973b, pp. 608–10.
8. Marx 1973b, p. 401.

linkage between the reproduction of the working class and the workings of the capitalist mode of production.

As for family and household, Marx only mentions them in the *Grundrisse* when considering pre-capitalist forms of production. Speaking of various pre-industrial or non-European societies, he consistently represents the family-household by its individual, presumed male, head. Thus, for example, the aim of work in such societies is 'sustenance of the individual proprietor and of his family, as well as of the total community'. Moreover, Marx assumes the universality of a natural sex-division of labour when he puts production of certain goods in brackets as a 'domestic side occupation of wives and daughters (spinning and weaving)'. Marx's surprisingly uncritical stance in these remarks in part owes its existence to the weakness of his sources.[9] It is more deeply rooted, as we shall see in the next section, in the relatively broad and unexplored conceptual boundaries accorded the sphere of 'the natural' in nineteenth-century thought.

The *Grundrisse* was the first in a series of manuscripts culminating in the publication of *Capital*. Only Volume I of *Capital*, which first appeared in 1867, was edited by Marx himself. After Marx's death, Engels used the various drafts produced by Marx in the 1860s to edit versions of Volumes II and III for publication. Volume IV, known today as *Theories of Surplus Value*, was assembled and published by Karl Kautsky. Considerable portions of the manuscripts Marx drafted between 1857 and 1870 remain unpublished.[10]

Scattered through the pages of *Capital*, Marx's comments on women's situation, on the family, on divisions of labour according to sex and age, and on the reproduction of the working class have never been sufficiently appreciated by students of the so-called woman-question. A systematic review of the three volumes discloses a great deal of important material.

Marx considers the actual situation of working-class women, as well as children, in the context of his description of capitalist development, focusing on the impact of the introduction of machinery. Machinery notably lessens the importance of physical strength in the labour-process. Under capitalist conditions, machinery therefore enables the employer to hire women and children, paying lower wages than male workers ordinarily command. The employment of women and children has specific physical, moral, and intellectual consequences, which Marx describes in a manner reminiscent of Engels's account, twenty years

9. Marx 1973b, pp. 472, 475; see also pp. 473, 484, 495. On the sources, see the introduction by Eric Hobsbawm in Marx 1965, pp. 20–7.

10. For a clear summary of the publishing history of the manuscripts, see the Vintage Books edition of *Capital*, Marx 1977, pp. 26–8. See also Marx 1973b, pp. 11–12.

earlier, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.[11] He emphasises how the introduction of machinery also has a severe impact on branches of production not yet mechanised. Here, employers shift to 'cheap labor', that is, to a workforce composed of women, children, and the unskilled. The exploitation of these workers is merciless, for 'the technical foundation of the factory system, namely, the substitution of machines for muscular power, and the light character of the labor, is almost entirely absent in Manufacture, and at the same time women and over-young children are subjected, in a most unconscionable way, to the influence of poisonous or injurious substances'. In such sweatshops, mines, and huts, even more than in the mechanised factories, the capitalist mode of production 'shows its antagonistic and murderous side'.[12]

The evolution of capitalism has the general effect of continually altering the composition of the labour-force with respect to sex and age, as well as size. The introduction of machinery, for example, throws many people out of work, but may draw in others, among them women and children. In numerous branches of production, women and children replace men as the principal element in the work-force. Moreover, the extraordinary productivity of capitalist mechanised industry permits the number of domestic servants, 90 percent of them women, to increase greatly. Despite constant capitalist expansion, which to some extent offsets the impact of mechanisation on employment, crises periodically cripple production, force wages down, and cause mass unemployment. 'The workpeople are thus continually both repelled and attracted, hustled from pillar to post, while, at the same time, constant changes take place in the sex, age, and skill of the levies'.[13]

Next to the rich picture of social conditions under capitalism, the descriptive material in *Capital* on non-capitalist past societies is quite sparse. Nothing specifically relevant to the experience of women *per se* appears, and Marx concentrates instead on the family. Alluding to the variety of family forms in history, he observes that no single form is 'absolute and final'. Moreover, 'taken together [they] form a series in historical development'.[14] He is most interested in the self-supporting peasant-family, for it represents the family-form just preceding that of capitalist society. The peasant-family is an elementary unit of production,

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11. Marx 1971a, pp. 372–9. (Unless stated otherwise, all citations to *Capital* refer to the Progress Publishers edition.)

12. Marx 1971a, pp. 434–5. Marx then proceeds to a series of examples, pp. 435–42; see also pp. 455–6, 612–66. Other evidence appears in the discussions of unregulated branches of industry, the shift-system, and the struggle for a normal working day; pp. 233–8, 246–51, 264–81.

13. Marx 1971a, p. 428; see also pp. 384, 421–46, 457, and Marx 1977, p. 1061. On domestic servants, see Marx 1971a, pp. 420–1.

14. Marx 1971a, p. 460.

an 'individual direct producer', which unites 'agricultural activity and the rural home industries connected with it' in an 'indispensable combination'. Characterising the peasant-household as 'an isolated laborer with his family', Marx is minimally concerned with the division of labour inside it. Rather, he focuses on the peasant-family as a producing unit that may itself dispose of some surplus-labour, because it is here, in the distribution of this 'combined agricultural and industrial family labour', that he locates the mechanism for social reproduction in the feudal system.[15]

Marx explicitly discusses divisions of labour by sex or age in several places in *Capital*. The peasant family 'possesses a spontaneously developed system of division of labour. The distribution of the work within the family, and the regulation of the labor-time of the several members, depend as well upon differences of age and sex as upon natural conditions varying with the seasons'. Machinery sweeps away the importance of skill: 'In the place of the artificially produced distinctions between specialized workers, step the natural differences of age and sex'. When early industrial capitalists tried to extend working hours beyond any possible endurance, 'all bounds of morals and nature, age and sex, day and night, were broken down'.[16] These natural distinctions have their historical root in biology. At the beginning of time, 'there springs up naturally a division of labor, caused by differences of sex and age, a division that is consequently based on a purely physiological foundation'.[17]

Marx's view of the natural character of divisions of labour by sex and age leads him to the corollary that servile relations naturally constitute the internal organisation of all families in class-society. Along with most of his contemporaries, including Engels, he assumes that a single male adult, the husband and father of subordinate family-members, ordinarily and naturally heads the family-household in all societies. Hence, he observes, 'in private property of every type the *slavery* of the members of the family at least is always implicit since they are made use of and exploited by the head of the family'.[18] As early as *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels had used the notion of 'latent slavery' to represent internal relations in the family. Like the division of labour itself, 'the slavery latent in the family only develops gradually with the increase of population, the growth of wants, and with the extension of external intercourse, both of war and of barter'. Indeed, it is clear that 'latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first form of property'.[19] In his mature work, Marx returns to the

15. Marx 1971b, pp. 790–91, 796, 807, 795; see also p. 877, and Marx 1971a, p. 82.
16. Marx 1971a, pp. 82, 396, 264; see also pp. 384, 595.
17. Marx 1971a, p. 332.
18. Marx 1977, p. 1083.
19. Marx and Engels 1975a, p. 46.

theme when he argues that the development of capitalist machine-industry transforms parents into 'slave-holders, sellers of their own children'. Formerly, 'the workman sold his own labor-power, which he disposed of nominally as a free agent. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a slave-dealer'.[20] The image of slavery in these statements flows, in part, from assumptions about the natural character of the division of labour within the family, and tends to present a picture of women and children as passive victims rather than historical actors. Behind such formulations, which are more metaphorical than scientific, lurks a series of nineteenth-century ideological notions never sufficiently challenged.

Nineteenth-century social commentators often claimed a permanence based on nature for social relations that are actually specific to the capitalist mode of production. Such claims constituted a ready target for socialist polemics. In the *Manifesto*, for instance, Marx and Engels observe how a 'selfish misconception' on the part of the bourgeoisie leads it to 'transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from [the] present mode of production and form of property – historical relations that rise and disappear in the progress of production'.[21] But Marx and Engels were not equally capable of demystifying bourgeois notions regarding the natural status of historical divisions of labour according to sex and age, much less of replacing them with more appropriate concepts. Indeed, in this area, they come perilously close to a position that holds biology to be destiny. A quite damaging spectre of 'the natural' haunts their work, from the earliest writings to the most mature. It stamps their concept of a wage-minimum by assuming the obviousness of the division between mere physical subsistence and some more socially determined standard of living that might, for example, include generational reproduction or a family-household. It obscures their understanding of relationships within the working-class household, particularly where the wife is also a wage-labourer. And it undercuts their investigations of historical development by tying it to an unquestioned assumption of a natural division of labour between the sexes, originating in the biology of the sexual act. In the course of their work, Marx and Engels managed to soften some of the worst effects of these assumptions, often by postulating additional 'social' phenomena that outweigh the supposedly natural facts, but they never entirely overcame them. Only with the development of feminist perspectives in modern anthropology, and more especially of an approach in the social sciences that is simultaneously Marxist and feminist, have the boundaries of 'the natural' in this area begun to be seriously questioned.[22]

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20. Marx 1974, p. 88; Marx 1971a, p. 373; see also p. 285.
21. Marx and Engels 1975d, p. 501.
22. For reviews of this literature, see Rapp 1978–9 and Atkinson 1982–3. See also the works cited in notes 12 and 22 of Chapter 10.

The existence of divisions of labour according to age and sex has definite political ramifications, to which Marx briefly alludes in *Capital*. In the early period of capitalist development, 'the habits and the resistance of the male laborers' successfully block the entry of women and children into the wage-labour force. The introduction of machinery, however, 'at last breaks down the resistance which the male operatives in the manufacturing period continued to oppose to the despotism of capital'.[23] Thereafter, capital tends to equalise all work, while 'the technical subordination of the workman to the uniform motion of the instruments of labor, and the peculiar composition of the body of workpeople, consisting as it does of individuals of both sexes and of all ages, gives rise to a barrack discipline'.[24] This process of economic and social equalisation meets a barrier, however, in the dependent and subordinate status of women, and especially of children, who are also highly vulnerable to the assaults of large-scale industrial capitalism. Marx argues the necessity of protective legislation, and sketches its history. The development of capitalism overturned 'the economic foundation on which was based the traditional family, and the family labor corresponding to it', and thus tended to dissolve traditional family-relationships. 'The rights of the children had to be proclaimed'.[25] A long struggle ensued to force the state to formulate, officially recognise, and promulgate regulations protecting children and women. The passage of such protective legislation – limiting hours, forbidding night-work, providing meal-periods, and so forth – represented the outcome 'of a protracted civil war, more or less dissembled, between the capitalist class and the working class'.[26]

Marx does more, in *Capital*, than comment descriptively on the situation of women, the family, and sex-divisions of labour in past and present society. He makes a major contribution toward the development of the theory required to illuminate such historical developments. To the extent that the object of the so-called woman-question actually lies in the sphere of the reproduction of labour-power and the working class, Marx's economic writings constitute an essential starting point. From this perspective, the Marx of *Capital* had more to say of relevance to the issue of women's liberation than either he or his socialist followers ever realised. Three concepts are key: individual consumption, the value of labour-power, and the industrial reserve-army.

Individual consumption is a concept that Marx develops in opposition to productive consumption. While both productive and individual consumption

23. Marx 1971a, p. 346, 379; see also pp. 380, 384.
24. Marx 1971a, p. 399.
25. Marx 1971a, p. 459; see also p. 285.
26. Marx 1971a, p. 283; see also p. 268.

pertain to labour-processes in which human beings use up, that is, consume, products, the distinction is critical. Productive consumption refers, broadly speaking, to the bringing together of means of production – raw materials, tools or machines, auxiliary substances – and producers in a specific labour-process whose outcome is new products, either means of production or means of subsistence. By contrast, individual consumption refers to the processes by which producers consume means of subsistence – food, housing, clothing, and the like – with the result that they maintain themselves. 'The product, therefore, of individual consumption, is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption is a product distinct from the consumer'.[27]

In the most general sense, individual and productive consumption are processes that must take place in some form in any society, if it is to reproduce itself from day to day and year to year. Marx is, of course, especially interested in the workings of the capitalist mode of production, and focuses on the particular forms taken by individual and productive consumption under its dominance. Here, the process of individual consumption is mediated by the wage paid to the worker by the capitalist for the use of his or her capacity to work, and the distinction between productive and individual consumption takes a specific dual form.

> The laborer consumes in a two-fold way. While producing he consumes by his labor the means of production, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced. This is his productive consumption . . . On the other hand, the laborer turns the money paid to him for his labor-power into means of subsistence: this is his individual consumption.[28]

Most of Marx's remarks on the individual consumption of the worker present it as a process that takes place alone and in the abstract. Obviously, this is not enough. 'Taking the working class as a whole, a portion of [the] means of subsistence is consumed by members of the family who either do not yet work, or have ceased to do so'. Marx implies, here, a concept that would cover the maintenance not only of present wage-workers but of future and past wage-workers (such as children, aged and disabled persons, the unemployed), including those who are not currently wage-workers but take part in the process of individual consumption (such as house-wives). This concept would operate at the level of class-relations and social reproduction as a whole. Such a concept of the reproduction of the working class in fact lies just below the surface of Marx's discussion of individual consumption. From the point of view of 'capitalist production in full swing, and on its actual social scale', the working class's individual

27. Marx 1971a, p. 179.
28. Marx 1971a, p. 536.

consumption is 'the reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in exchange for labor-power, into fresh labor-power at the disposal of capital for exploitation. It is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the laborer himself'.[29] At the level of social reproduction, the problem of the renewal of the working class becomes critical. 'The labor-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labor power'. While Marx himself never developed a comprehensive and rigorous view of the reproduction of labour-power, he recognised its importance for a theory of the capitalist mode of production whenever he pointed out that 'the maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital'.[30]

In the capitalist mode of production, the processes of individual consumption enable the worker to return to the market, ready to sell his or her labour-power to the capitalist. But what, exactly, is labour-power, and how is its value determined?

Marx defines labour-power as 'the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description'. In the capitalist mode of production, labour-power takes the form of a commodity, that is, a thing that has both use-value and value. It is labour-power's use-value that so endears it to the capitalist, for unlike any other commodity, it 'possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value'. When put to use – consumed – in the capitalist labour-process, labour-power creates more value than was originally invested. Surplus-value originates, then, in the productive consumption of this unique and wonderful commodity.[31] But before labour-power can be consumed in the production- process, the capitalist must acquire it in the market by exchanging for it an equivalent value.

According to Marx, the value of the commodity labour-power is determined in the same way as the value of any other commodity. That is, the value of labour-power represents the socially necessary labour required for the production of labour-power. For a given individual, then, 'the production of labor power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance. For his maintenance he requires a given quantity of the means of subsistence. Therefore the labor-time requisite for the production of labor-power reduces itself to that necessary for the production of those means of subsistence; in other words, the value of labor-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance

29. Marx 1977a, p. 984; Marx 1971a, pp. 536–7.
30. Marx 1971a, pp. 168, 537. See also pp. 538, 541–2; 2: 356, 385, 396; and Marx 1973b, pp. 458, 676–7.
31. Marx 1971a, p. 164.

of the laborer'. Nonetheless, there is something quite special about the value of labour-power, for 'the number and extent of [man's] so-called necessary wants, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development'. Into the determination of the value of labour-power enters, therefore, a 'historical and moral element'.[32]

Marx developed this point at greater length in a series of lectures entitled 'Wages, Price, and Profit', delivered two years before the publication of *Capital*. Here, Marx distinguishes two components of the value of labour-power, 'the one merely physical, the other historical or social'. The physical element determines the ultimate lower limit, although Marx observes that this limit is extremely elastic. Thus, 'a quick succession of unhealthy and short-lived generations will keep the labor market as well supplied as a series of vigorous and long-lived generations'. The value of labour-power 'is in every country determined by a *traditional standard of life*. It is not mere physical life, but it is the satisfaction of certain wants springing from the social conditions in which people are placed and reared up'. Marx retains, in this discussion, the concept of a more or less natural physical subsistence-level, but emphasises the wide latitude for expansion and contraction in the 'historical or social' component. In *Capital*, even this small concession to the notion of a natural physical minimum has all but disappeared, and the 'historical and moral element' plays the principal role. Nevertheless, Marx insists that the value of labour-power can be established, for 'in a given country, at a given period, the average quantity of the means of subsistence necessary for the laborer is practically known'.[33]

As with every commodity, the price of labour-power does not ordinarily coincide with its value, but rather fluctuates around it. At times, the price will rise above the value of labour-power, with a consequent easing of 'the length and weight of the golden chain' of capitalist exploitation. More ominously, the price of labour-power may fall substantially below its value, to the point that sectors of existing labour-power are not renewed in the next generation.[34]

The existence of fluctuations in the price of labour-power, and their impact on the lives of working people, had already been discussed several times by Marx and Engels. With *Capital*, Marx roots these fluctuations in a theory of the value of labour-power, and thereby goes beyond the surface phenomena of supply, demand, and capitalist avarice. Thus, for example, he offers a clear, if all too brief, analysis of the structure of the value of labour-power with respect to the household, focusing, as in earlier texts, on the effects of the increasing entry of

32. Marx 1971a, pp. 167, 168; see also pp. 486, 524.
33. Marx 1973c, pp. 72–3; Marx 1971a, p. 168. See also Marx 1977, pp. 1067–9.
34. Marx 1971a, p. 579; see also pp. 580–1, and Marx 1977, pp. 1032, 1068. For the fluctuation of a commodity's price around its value, see Marx 1971a, pp. 98–106.

women and children into the wage-labour force. Marx assumes a situation in which the value of labour-power is such that the wage of a single adult male worker suffices to support an entire family-household. While this assumption is questionable from a historical perspective, it provides a theoretical base-line against which to examine variations in the value of labour-power. An innovation such as the introduction of machinery, 'by throwing every member of [the worker's] family on to the labor market, spreads the value of the man's labor power over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labor power'. The value of the individual worker's labour-power falls because it now takes the wage-work of several household-members to obtain the original quantity of means of subsistence. Marx amplifies this observation in several ways. Most important, the entry of additional household-members into wage-labour means, other things being equal, an intensification of the rate of exploitation. Further, the fact that several family-members work where only one did before may require the purchase of more means of subsistence, and thus raise somewhat the total value of the household's labour-power. For example, 'domestic work, such as sewing and mending, must be replaced by the purchase of ready-made articles. Hence the diminished expenditure of labor in the house is accompanied by an increased expenditure of money. The cost of keeping the family increases, and balances the greater income'.[35]

It is perfectly possible for the value of the labour-power expended by an entire household to rise substantially, accompanied by a real shift upward in its 'standard of life', while at the same time the value of the labour-power of the individuals comprising the household falls and the rate of exploitation increases. In general, 'the capitalist may pay *higher wages* and still lower the *value of labor* [power], if the rise of wages does not correspond to the greater amount of labor extracted, and the quicker decay of the laboring power thus caused'. Marx gives a strikingly familiar example of how bourgeois ideology interprets this phenomenon: 'Your middle class statisticians will tell you . . . that the average wages of factory families in Lancashire have risen. They forget that instead of the labor of the man, the head of the family, his wife and perhaps three or four children are now thrown under the Juggernaut wheels of capital, and that the rise of the aggregate wages does not correspond to the aggregate surplus labor extracted from the family'.[36]

The subject of the industrial reserve-army, which Marx characterises as the principal manifestation of capitalism's impact on the working class, takes up an entire chapter of Volume I of *Capital*. In general, 'the greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and, therefore, also

35. Marx 1971a, p. 373; see also Marx 1971b, p. 233.
36. Marx 1973c, p. 68; see also Marx 1971a, p. 509.

the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productiveness of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army . . . *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*'.[37] More clearly than in the *Grundrisse*, Marx ties the existence, size, and form of a surplus-population to the processes of capital-accumulation.

As capital grows, it demands progressively more labour. Workers must work harder and for longer hours, and more workers must be hired. 'Accumulation of capital is, therefore, increase of the proletariat'. This tendency to swell the number of wage-workers absolutely is opposed by a second, and far more powerful, mechanism also inherent in capital-accumulation. The drive for surplus-value forces capitalists constantly to augment productivity, chiefly through the introduction of machinery. An ever-growing quantity of means of production requires less and less human labour to be set in motion in the production-process. As a result, demand for labour falls relatively, and a surplus-population of wage-workers emerges. This relative surplus-population constitutes 'a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army . . . Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation'.[38]

The industrial reserve-army fluctuates in size according to the cruel whims of the capitalist accumulation-cycle. At all times, moreover, relative surplus-population takes several distinct forms. The floating reserve is made up of workers who move in and out of employment according to the needs of the constantly changing capitalist labour-process. The latent reserve consists of those thrust out of work by the extension of capitalism into non-capitalist sectors. The stagnant reserve is formed by chronically under-employed workers, who are condemned to terrible poverty and always willing to work for the lowest wages in the worst conditions. Below these three categories of reserves, paupers make up the bottom layer of the surplus-population. 'Pauperism', Marx observes, 'is the hospital of the active labor army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army'.[39] While he is never entirely clear in his formulations, Marx seems to regard the industrial reserve-army as included in, rather than co-extensive with, the relative surplus-population.

At once the product of capital-accumulation and the lever for its further extension, the industrial reserve-army embodies a 'law of population' specific to capitalism. In this sense, Marx puts the reproduction of the working class at the heart of the capital-accumulation process. 'The reproduction of a mass of labor power, which must incessantly re-incorporate itself with capital for that capital's

37. Marx 1971a, p. 603.
38. Marx 1971a, pp. 576, 592.
39. Marx 1971a, p. 603.

self-expansion; which cannot get free from capital, and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom it sells itself; this reproduction of labor power forms, in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself'.[40]

In Volume III of *Capital*, Marx returns to the concepts of relative surplus-population and the industrial reserve-army, this time looking at them in the context of total social reproduction. At this level, the capitalist accumulation-process itself gives rise to the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall. Among the factors potentially counter-acting this tendency, Marx names the relative surplus-population. Members of the industrial reserve-army form a pool of available cheap labour. Some capitalists hire them at extremely low wages, and forgo the advances in productivity that lead eventually to a falling average rate of profit. In these branches of production, the rate and mass of surplus-value are unusually high, producing a counter-balance to those branches in which the rates have fallen. It may even be that the industrial reserve-army 'more or less paralyzes' the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall. Once again, the reproduction of the working class stands at the centre of the process of capitalist production, now considered as a whole.[41]

Marx's discussion of individual consumption, the value of labour-power, and the industrial reserve-army is tantalisingly incomplete. In particular, the treatment of three issues remains vague and requires clarification. First, it is never obvious whether the concept of the value of labour-power covers the maintenance and replacement of the individual worker alone or includes that of other persons as well, for example, family-members supported by a worker's wage. Second, Marx scarcely mentions the unpaid domestic labour performed as part of the tasks that result in the reproduction of the worker, and accords it no clear theoretical status. Third, the critical question of the relationship between the concept of the industrial reserve-army, which appears in the context of discussions of capital-accumulation, and the more limited concept of individual consumption is never really addressed.[42] Despite these ambiguities, and the

40. Marx 1971a, pp. 575–6. On laws of population, see pp. 591–2.

41. Marx 1971b, pp. 236–7. See also the section entitled 'Excess Capital and Excess Population', pp. 250–9.

42. Marx would perhaps have taken on the task of resolving these contradictions and gaps in the future, never developed, 'special study of wage labor'. Marx 1971a, p. 508. Whether or not he would have addressed the question of women's oppression directly in the study is, of course, another issue. Roman Rosdolsky's argument that Marx entirely abandoned the plan for the separate book on wage-labour is unconvincing. Rosdolsky 1977, pp. 57–62. Molyneux suggests that the reproduction of labour-power constitutes a condition of existence for capitalism, but cannot itself be placed theoretically within the concept of the capitalist mode of production; hence, she claims, it was proper for Marx to exclude it from the discussion in *Capital*: Molyneux 1979, p. 20. For the author's view, see Chapters 10 and 11.

generally schematic and unfinished character of Marx's remarks on the reproduction of labour-power and the working class, his work provides the foundation for a theory of the relationship of women and the family to social reproduction in general and the capitalist mode of production in particular.

Consistent with his achievement, in *Capital*, of the rudiments of a theoretical perspective on the reproduction of labour-power and the working class, Marx's brief comments on the future of the family and relations between the sexes place them in the context of social reproduction as a whole. The development of capitalism creates 'a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes'. In its present, capitalist, guise, large-scale industry brings workers together in a 'brutal' labour-process, which 'becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery', where 'the laborer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the laborer'. Nonetheless, it is precisely this phenomenon that Marx identifies as the potential basis for new family-relations, inasmuch as it assigns 'an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes'. In sum, 'the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages must necessarily, under suitable conditions, become a source of humane development'.

As to what form that development might take in terms of the family and sexual relations in a future communist society, Marx cautiously refrains from speculating.[43]

In these years, Marx seized, once again, the opportunity to engage in practical political work. After a period of relative inactivity, the working classes of Europe recovered from the defeats of 1848–50, and began a process of reorganisation which took its most advanced form in the International Working Men's Association. Founded in 1864 on the initiative of working-class militants, the International represented an uneasy coalition of English trade-union leaders, whose chief political aim was suffrage, and French utopian socialists, bent on establishing producers' cooperatives and opposed to both strikes and political action. It fell largely to Marx and Engels to attempt the shaping of this amalgam into an adequate force for socialism. For a decade, until the International collapsed in the wake of the Paris Commune, they committed themselves to the delicate task.

As its name suggests, the International was an organisation composed almost exclusively of men. In this it reflected the general character of the working-class movement, if not the working class, of the time. Not only was the working-class

43. Marx 1971a, p. 460.

movement a largely male province, it ordinarily espoused a decidedly backward view of women and of women's work. Throughout the nineteenth century, male workers and their organisations argued for the abolition of female wage-labour, refused to admit women into labour-organisations, opposed female suffrage, and promoted an idealised image of woman's proper place at the family-hearth. Although the horrible conditions in which women worked and their desperate misery struck everyone, the arguments to exclude them from wage-labour were unrealistic as well as pragmatically unwise. Such reasoning denied the fact that sizable sectors of working-class women were already permanent members of the wage-labour force. And it enabled employers to perpetuate division and competition within the working class. In this atmosphere, Marx put forth positions that upheld the rights of women and protected, to the best of his understanding, the interests and future of all members of the working class. At the same time, a nineteenth-century view of the social meaning of physiological differences between the sexes influenced his programmatic suggestions.

The critical theoretical insight that backed Marx's positions on women's and children's wage-labour was his distinction between the labour-process and the particular form it takes under capitalist conditions. 'I do not say it is wrong that women and children should participate in our social production', he observed at one meeting of the International's General Council. Rather, the issue is 'the way in which they are made to work under existing circumstances'.[44] Given this situation, what was the working-class movement to do? Women, and especially children, should be protected by legislation against the worst assaults of capitalist exploitation. 'The laborers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death'.[45] Children need time to grow and learn. Women must be excluded 'from branches of industry that are specifically unhealthy for the female body or are objectionable morally for the female sex'.[46] The necessity for such protective legislation arises from the contradictory position of women and children within capitalist society. On the one hand, the drawing of women and children out of social isolation and patriarchal oppression in the peasant-family to 'cooperate in the great work of social production [is] a progressive, sound and legitimate tendency'. On the other, 'under capital it was distorted into an abomination'.[47]

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44. Anonymous 1964, pp. 2, 232.
45. Marx 1971a, p. 285.
46. Marx 1970b, p. 22. See also Marx 1974, p. 88: '[Women are to] be rigorously excluded from all *nightwork whatever*, and all sort of work hurtful to the delicacy of the sex, or exposing their bodies to poisonous and otherwise deleterious agencies'.
47. Marx 1974, p. 88.

'The woman has thus become an active agent in our social production', Marx observed. It followed that women must be incorporated as active participants in political work. 'Anybody who knows anything of history', he wrote to his friend Dr. Ludwig Kugelmann, 'knows that major social transformations are impossible without ferment among women'.[48] In 1871, Marx initiated and the International adopted a new rule recommending the establishment of female branches, without excluding the possibility of branches composed of both sexes.[49] Effective implementation of the recommendation depended, above all, on its being taken seriously by men at every level of leadership. In view of the history of the nineteenth-century working-class movement, prospects for such a general commitment were quite poor, and in any case, the International was nearing the end of its organisational existence. Nonetheless, Marx's recommendation left an important legacy by establishing, at least in principle, the legitimacy of autonomous women's organisations within the mass movement.

After the collapse of the First International, Marx and Engels served as theoretical and tactical advisers to the emerging working-class parties that were later to form the Second International. Thus, delegates from the new French Workers' Party consulted them on the Party's programme for the 1880 elections. Discussed and drawn up in London, the programme included an introduction by Marx in which, as he later put it, 'the communist goal is defined in a few words'. The opening sentence of the introduction specifically asserts that 'the emancipation of the producing class involves all human beings without distinction of sex or race'.[50] These two issues – which, in the form of the so-called woman- and national questions, were to constitute central problems for revolutionaries in the coming decades – had already become a pressing concern in socialist theory and practice. At the threshold of the epoch of imperialist domination and world revolution, but at the close of his own life, Marx was still very much in step.

Taken as a whole, Marx's mature writings offer the rudiments of a theoretical foundation for analysing the situation of women from the point of view of social reproduction. Marx himself did not, however, develop such an analysis, nor did

48. Anonymous 1964, pp. 2, 232. Marx to Dr. Kugelmann, 12 December, 1868, Marx 1934, p. 83 (translation slightly modified to accord with the German original; Marx und Engels 1956a, pp. 582–3).

49. Anonymous 1964, pp. 442, 460. Like Marx, Engels supported, at least in principle, equal participation by women in political life; see Engels to Ida Pauli, 14 February 1877, cited in Meyer 1977, p. 93.

50. For the programme, see Guesde 1959, p. 117. The translation in Marx 1974, p. 376, made, unaccountably, from a German version, misleadingly gives 'mankind' for 'êtres humaines'. Marx's later comment is in a letter to F. A. Sorge, 5 November 1880, Marx and Engels 1965, p. 332. See also Engels to E. Bernstein, 25 October 1881: Marx and Engels 1965, p. 344.

he leave significant notes on the subject. Subsequent attempts by late nineteenth-century socialists, including Engels, to use Marx's theory of social development to examine women's situation fell rather short of the mark. As the years passed, moreover, and the problem of women's oppression became codified in the form of the so-called woman-question, the very possibility of taking the perspective suggested in Marx's mature work diminished. Recent socialist-feminist efforts to situate women in terms of a concept of the reproduction of labour-power therefore constitute the first sustained attempt to develop an understanding of women's oppression based on Marx's theory of social reproduction.

Chapter Six
Engels: a Defective Formulation

Having arrived in 1850 as an exile from the political storms on the continent, Engels remained in Manchester for two decades, employed in the family textile-firm. A secure and growing income enabled him to assist Marx, continually in financial difficulty during these years. In 1870, on the eve of the Paris Commune, and with developments in the International quickening, Engels liquidated his partnership in the business and moved to London, where he could more fully participate in political life. Until Marx's death in 1883, the two friends worked side-by-side in the socialist movement, daily discussing every aspect of their political and theoretical work. With Marx, Engels sat on the General Council of the International, and worked to unify the various trends within the socialist movement. And like Marx, he played the part of dean and adviser to the movement after the International's collapse, continuing in this function up to his death in 1895.

During these last twenty years of his life, Engels also embarked on a wide-ranging programme of research and writing. Among his published works, two well-known and extremely popular books touch on the problem of women's oppression. Together with *The Communist Manifesto* these texts acted as fundamental guides for the emerging generation of socialists.

Engels produced the work that became known as *Anti-Dühring* in 1878 as a polemic against the views of the socialist Eugen Dühring. The book presents a comprehensive exposition of what Engels saw as 'the communist world outlook fought for by Marx and myself'.

Naturally enough, that outlook included some comments on women, the family, and the reproduction of the working class, which generally recapitulate his own and Marx's earlier analyses and positions. In a survey of pre-Marxist socialist thinkers, for instance, Engels approves Fourier's critique of the relations between the sexes and of women's position in capitalist society, and asserts, following Marx's free paraphrase of Fourier in *The Holy Family*, that the utopian socialist was the first to regard woman's position as an index of general social development.[1] Engels also reviews a number of themes discussed in previous works: the determination of the value of labour-power, the effects of machinery on the working-class family, the emergence of an industrial reserve-army, the character of bourgeois marriage as a legal form of prostitution, and the progressive dissolution of traditional family-bonds, including 'patriarchal subordination', with the advance of capitalism.[2] Looking at the family in earlier societies, Engels speaks of 'the natural division of labor within the family', and with some qualification, subsumes all members of a household under its male head.[3] Finally, Engels insists that family-forms are rooted in social relations, and thus that the family can change if society is transformed. In this context, he draws a critical programmatic corollary from Marx's statement in *Capital* that capitalism creates the foundation for such changes. What is necessary is not only 'the free association of men', but 'the transformation of private domestic work into a public industry'. This is the first formulation within the classical-Marxist tradition of a position later to become a central tenet of socialist strategy.[4]

Engels's other major book from this period is the famous *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, written between March and May of 1884, published that October, and instantaneously accorded the place of a socialist classic.

The circumstances of Engels's startlingly rapid production of the *Origin* remain somewhat mysterious. The book is based, as its subtitle ('In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan') indicates, on Morgan's *Ancient Society*, which had appeared in 1877 and immediately engaged Marx's interest. Writing to the German socialist Kautsky on 16 February 1884, Engels described the late Marx's enthusiasm for Morgan's book, adding 'if I had the time I would work up the material, with Marx's notes, . . . but I cannot even think of it'. Yet by late March he was already at work on the *Origin* and by the end of April close to

1. Engels 1947, p. 308. For Marx's paraphrase of Fourier, see note 2 of Chapter 4.
2. Engels 1947, pp. 243–5, 304, 310, 325–8.
3. Engels 1947, pp. 118, 214, 215, 319, 322.
4. Engels 1947, p. 377. The question of changes in the organisation of domestic labour had, of course, long been a concern among utopian thinkers; see, for example, Hayden 1981.

finishing.[5] The full explanation of the reasons for Engels's change in plan, which is especially striking in view of the fact that he was already immersed in the editing of Marx's unfinished volumes of *Capital*, must await further research. It seems likely that the context was political. In 1879, the German socialist leader August Bebel had published *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*, which appeared in a revised version late in 1883. Tremendously popular from the start, Bebel's *Woman* bore the influence of utopian socialism throughout; in addition, it reflected emerging tendencies toward reformism within the socialist movement. Engels's decision to write the *Origin* surely reflected a recognition of the weaknesses in Bebel's work. The socialist movement's commitment to the liberation of women urgently required an adequate theoretical foundation. Understood as an implicit polemic within the movement, the *Origin* represented Engels's attempt to provide one.[6]

The socialist tradition has treated the *Origin* as the definitive Marxist pronouncement on the family and therefore on the so-called woman question. Further, the tradition holds that the book accurately reflects the views of Marx as well as Engels. Neither assertion fairly measures the work's status. In the first place, the subject covered in the *Origin*, as its title indicates, is the development not only of the family but of private property and the state. The observation is important, for it suggests the book's limited goals with respect to the issue of women's subordination. Rather than provide a comprehensive analysis of women, the family, and the reproduction of the working class, the *Origin* seeks simply to situate certain aspects of the question securely in a historical and theoretical context. In the second place, the *Origin* bears the scars of its hasty genesis throughout. Far from the work of either Marx or Engels at his best, it constitutes, in Engels's words, a 'meagre substitute for what my departed friend no longer had the time to do'.[7]

In drafting the *Origin*, Engels relied not just on Morgan's *Ancient Society*, but on a series of notebooks in which Marx had entered passages from various authors' writings concerning primitive society. These 'Ethnological Notebooks', composed in 1880–1, include a lengthy abstract of Morgan's book. It is not at all clear what Marx intended to do with the material he was collecting, and Engels altered the framework established in the 'Notebooks' to some extent. To grasp the structure and meaning of Engels's book, it is, therefore, necessary

5. Engels to Kautsky, 16 February and 26 April 1884, Marx and Engels 1965, pp. 368, 372. See also Krader (ed.) 1972, pp. 388–90.

6. For the publication history and a critique of August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, see Chapter 7.

7. Engels 1972, p. 71. Important critical evaluations of the *Origin* include: Brown 1978; Brown 1979; Delmar 1976; Draper 1972; Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 28–9, 58–9; Krader 1972; Lane 1976; Leacock 1963; Sacks 1975; Santamaria 1975; Stern 1948.

to examine the contents, theoretical assumptions, and weaknesses of Morgan's *Ancient Society*.[8]

In *Ancient Society* Morgan, an American anthropologist living in northern New York State, seeks to demonstrate the strikingly parallel evolution of what he saw as four essential characteristics of human society: inventions and discoveries, government, family, and property. The book organises a vast array of ethnographic data into sections corresponding to these four characteristics, labelled by Morgan 'Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilisation'. Part One, a short survey entitled 'Growth of Intelligence through Inventions and Discoveries', grounds Morgan's evolutionary periodisation in three major stages of the development of the arts of subsistence. At the most primitive level of human social organisation, peoples in the stage of 'savagery' – what anthropologists today call hunting and gathering, or foraging, cultures – obtain subsistence by gathering wild plants, fishing, and hunting. The second period, 'barbarism', is characterised by food-production, as opposed to the food gathering typical of savagery. Cultures at the lower levels of barbarism practice horticulture, a simple type of plant-domestication. In the upper stages of barbarism, animals are domesticated, and a more sophisticated agriculture, which includes the use of the plow and irrigation, develops. Finally, in the period of 'civilization', societies base themselves on these advanced agricultural methods, to which they add writing and the keeping of records. Morgan divides such societies into two broad types, ancient and modern. With this sequence of stages, Morgan rests all human history on a materialist foundation, but one whose essence is technological, not social.

Morgan devotes nearly two-thirds of *Ancient Society* to Part Two, 'Growth of the Idea of Government'. Here, he presents a theory of the evolution of social organisation from early kin-based forms to fully developed political governance. The social organisation of the most primitive peoples is based simply on broadly defined 'classes' of persons permitted to marry one another. As the circle of possible marriage partners narrows, the 'gens', or clan, develops. A clan consists of persons related through one parental line only. In a 'gentile' society – that is, one organised on the basis of clans – an individual belongs to the clan of either mother or father, not to both. Marriage must ordinarily be to someone outside one's own clan. Where property exists, it is retained within the clan upon the death of a member. The fundamental social unit is therefore the clan, either matrilineal or patrilineal. The couple bond cannot have the central structural role it later acquires, for it links persons whose major allegiances are to distinct clans. Morgan shows that the gentile, or clan, system provides the foundation for

8. Morgan 1877. Of many subsequent reprint-editions, the most useful is Leacock 1963 (Krader 1972).

quite complex types of social organisation. Clans may be grouped in larger units, called phratries, and these in turn may join to form tribes. In the clan-system's most developed form, which Morgan believed he had observed among the Iroquois Indians, several tribes constitute a confederacy, or nation, able to include thousands of members over a vast geographical area, yet lacking formal political institutions and still based on personal ties.

In the latest stages of barbarism, technological advances in productivity render society so complex that clan organisation must give way. The city develops, bringing heightened requirements at the level of governance not solvable by the clan-system. Property, while not a new phenomenon, attains a dominant role. 'Henceforth the creation and protection of property became the primary objects of the government'.[9] In place of the clan-system step the institutions of political organisation, for government can no longer rest on personal relations. Morgan sketches the early evolution of the state, which organizes people, now distributed in property-classes, on a territorial basis. Taking Rome as his example, he cites three principal changes that mark the shift from gentile to political society. First, a system of classes based on property replaces the clan-organisation. Second, instead of government by means of a democratic tribal council, an assembly dominated by the propertied classes holds, and soon extends, political power. Third, territorial areas, rather than kin-based clans, phratries, or tribes, become the units of government.

Even before the emergence of developed political organisation, a critical change occurred within the clan-system. At a certain point, matrilineal clan-organisation succumbed to the principle of patrilineality, under the impetus of the development of property. According to Morgan, descent through the female-line was the original form of clan-organisation, because of its biological certainty. However, as soon as property in cattle and land emerged, two facts, entirely self-evident in Morgan's view, meant that 'descent in the female-line was certain of overthrow, and the substitution of the male-line equally assured'.[10] First, men naturally became the owners of the property; second, they developed a natural wish to transmit it to their own children. Hence, in the middle-stages of barbarism, the accumulation of property has the consequence that the patrilineal clan becomes the basic unit of the gentile social system.

Part Three, entitled 'Growth of the Idea of the Family', makes up roughly one-quarter of *Ancient Society*. Emphasising that the form of the family is highly variable, Morgan traces its evolution through five stages. Progressive restriction of permissible marriage partners constitutes the basis of the development. In the first type of family, the 'consanguine', sisters and female cousins are married, as

9. Morgan 1877, p. 348.
10. Morgan 1877, p. 355.

a group, to their brothers and male cousins. The next family type, the 'punaluan', modifies the first by prohibiting marriage between own brothers and sisters.

These two forms of group-marriage, which suggest an even earlier stage of promiscuous intercourse, represent conjectural forms, reconstructed by Morgan on the basis of his understanding of kin-terminology, and broadly corresponding to the stages of savagery and early barbarism.

The third form, the 'syndyasmian' or 'pairing' family, is founded on marriage between single-pairs, who live within communal households and whose bond may be dissolved at the will of either partner. The pairing family constitutes the family-type associated with clan-based societies. Lineage-ties remain primary to each partner, for the clan is the basic social unit and takes final responsibility for its members. Morgan notes the measure of collective security provided to individuals by this system, as well as its relative egalitarianism when compared with subsequent family forms.

The last two family-types reflect the influence of the development of property. The 'patriarchal' family organises a group of persons – slave, servant, and free – under a male head who exercises supreme authority. The 'monogamian' family is based on the marriage of a single couple which, with its children, composes an independent household. Morgan conceptualises both family-types as institutions whose primary purpose is to hold property and transmit it exclusively to their offspring. To ensure the children's paternity, strict fidelity is required of women. Paternal power is more or less absolute, and only death can break the marriage-bond. The patriarchal and monogamian families therefore stand in total opposition to clan-organisation. They are forms more appropriate for political society, and they appear in the last stages of barbarism and continue into the period of civilisation.

Morgan argues that the patriarchal and monogamian families represent a social advance, for they permit a heightened individuality of persons. At the same time, he recognises that in practice, such individuality was available to men only. Women, as well as children, were generally subordinated to the paternal power of the family-head. By contrast, the pairing family of clan-society had provided women with a certain level of relative equality and power, particularly before the transition to patrilineal descent. So long as children remained in their mother's clan, the pairing family was embedded in the matrilineal clan household, and Morgan thought it likely that the woman, rather than the man, functioned as the family's centre. With the shift to descent in the male line, the pairing family became part of the patrilineal clan household, and the woman was more isolated from her gentile kin. This change 'operated powerfully to lower her position and arrest her progress in the social scale', but the woman was still a member of her own clan and thus retained a substantial measure of

independent social standing.[11] The advent of paternal power in the patriarchal and monogamian families opens the way to a much more profound degradation of woman's position. Here, the cruel subordination of women and children belies Morgan's optimistic notions of evolutionary development. He presents the material honestly, however, heartened by a faith that monogamy is, in principle at least, the highest and most egalitarian form of the family. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence stands in contradiction to Morgan's own commitment to a progressivist theory of evolution.[12] It fell to Engels, in the *Origin*, to suggest a more adequate theoretical framework.

Ancient Society closes with Part Four, entitled 'Growth of the Idea of Property', in which Morgan summarises his understanding of social development. He distinguishes three stages in the development of property, generally corresponding to the three major evolutionary periods. Among the most primitive peoples, those at the level of savagery, property scarcely exists. Lands are held in common, as is housing, and Morgan speculates that the germ of property lies in a developing right to inherit personal articles. Property in land, houses, and livestock emerges in the stage of barbarism. The rules of inheritance at first conform to clan-organisation: property reverts to the clan of the deceased, not to his or her spouse. Eventually, individual ownership through the monogamian family prevails, with property inherited by the deceased owner's children. The period of civilisation has arrived.

In conclusion, Morgan offers the observation that in his own time, property has become an 'unmanageable power'. Society is on a collision course, and its disintegration is the logical consequence 'of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction'. Nevertheless, Morgan holds out hope for society's reconstruction on 'the next higher plane', where it will appear as 'a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity' of ancient clan society.[13]

Ancient Society is a monumental work. In it, Morgan solved the puzzle of clan-organisation, described the sequence of social institutions in evolutionary terms, and attempted to analyse the basis for their development. Published in 1877, the book became the foundation for all subsequent research on the history of early human societies, despite its many factual and interpretive errors. These short-comings, as well as Morgan's substantial contributions, have been

11. Morgan 1877, p. 481.
12. Morgan 1877, pp. 360, 398–400, 474–5, 477–8, 480–8, 499.
13. Morgan 1877, pp. 561–2.

much discussed.[14] Here, the emphasis will be on Morgan's understanding of the mechanisms of social change.

Morgan presents his material in parallel form, as four kinds of phenomena 'which extend themselves in parallel lines along the pathways of human progress from savagery to civilization'. Very much the pragmatic scholar, he sticks close to the data and permits himself to generalise but not to theorise. Thus, each line constitutes 'a natural as well as necessary sequence of progress', but the source of this necessity remains mysterious. Moreover, Morgan's discussion of the evolution of the family presupposes a grasp of the development of clan-organisation and vice versa. The extremely repetitive organisation of *Ancient Society* reveals its author's inability to establish a clear theoretical relationship among the 'four classes of facts'. A theory of social development lies implicit, nonetheless, in Morgan's work. Frequently observing that 'the experience of mankind has run in nearly uniform channels', he proposes that the placement of the major markers in these channels is determined by the evolution of the arts of subsistence – that is, by the types of inventions and discoveries used to acquire or produce the means of subsistence. In short, human progress ultimately rests on technological advances in the mode of material life.[15]

Morgan acknowledges the critical role played by the development of property. 'It is impossible to overestimate the influence of property in the civilization of mankind'. The need to transmit property to heirs underlay, in his view, the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal clan-organisation. Similarly, 'property, as it increased in variety and amount, exercised a steady and constantly augmenting influence in the direction of monogamy'. And it was the rise of new 'complicated wants', growing out of an accelerated accumulation of property, that brought about the dissolution of clan-organisation and its replacement by political society. But what is property and why is it a motivating force in social development? In Morgan's account, property consists of things, the objects of subsistence, but it is not embedded in any determinate network of social relations. Once the idea of property has germinated, it simply grows automatically, extending itself in both magnitude and complexity while nurturing the sequence of stages in the arts of subsistence. 'Commencing at zero in savagery, the passion for the possession of property, as the representative of accumulated subsistence, has now become dominant over the human mind in civilized races'. For Morgan, a passion in the minds of men – namely, greed – leads naturally to the evolution of property and, consequently, to social development in general.[16]

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14. The starting point for any evaluation of Morgan's *Ancient Society* must be Leacock's introduction to *Ancient Society* – Leacock 1963.
15. Morgan 1877, pp. vii, 3, 8.
16. Morgan 1877, pp. 511–12, 263, vii; see also pp. 5–6.

In the extracts of *Ancient Society* he made in the 'Ethnological Notebooks', Marx revised Morgan's sequence of presentation.[17] Morgan had begun with the evolution of the arts of subsistence, and then surveyed the parallel development of government, family, and property. Marx moved Morgan's long section on government to the end of his notes and altered the relative amount of space given to each part. He reduced by half the discussion of the arts of subsistence, and by a third the section on the family. At the same time, he extended, proportionately, the space given by Morgan to the consideration of property and government. In sum, Marx's notes rearrange Morgan's material as follows: arts of subsistence (reduced); family (reduced); property (expanded); government (slightly expanded). Through this reorganisation, Marx perhaps sought to put Morgan's findings in a theoretically more coherent order.

To the extent that Engels incorporated the material in *Ancient Society* into his *Origin*, he adopted the organisation of Marx's excerpts in the 'Ethnological Notebooks' – making, however, several important structural changes. He did not devote a separate chapter to the subject of property. He greatly enlarged the relative importance of the chapter on the family, giving it almost as much space as he assigned to the chapters on the state. And he shifted the focus to the transition between barbarism and civilisation, in accordance with his and Marx's interest in the emergence of the state. In this way, Engels converted Morgan's four 'lines of human progress' into three sections, which make up the bulk of the *Origin.*

Substantively, Engels followed Morgan quite closely. He pruned the wealth of ethnographic evidence, even replacing it where his own studies offered more relevant data. He emphasised the points that most tellingly exposed the revised theoretical foundation he was seeking to establish. And he employed a more readable, and often engagingly chatty, literary style. In general, the *Origin* seems to be a shorter, as well as a more focused and accessible version of *Ancient Society*. A closer examination of the ways in which Engels's presentation of the material differs from Morgan's reveals both the contributions and the limitations of the *Origin*.

In a short opening chapter, 'Stages in Prehistoric Culture', Engels succinctly recapitulates Morgan's account of the evolution of three stages in the arts of subsistence. Emphasising the richness and accuracy of the account, he also acknowledges a certain weakness. 'My sketch will seem flat and feeble compared with the picture to be unrolled at the end of our travels'.[18] Engels refers, here,

17. Krader 1972, pp. 11 and 365, n. 21. See also the review of Krader in Santamaria 1975.
18. Engels 1972, p. 93.

to his plan to deepen Morgan's work by recasting it in the light of Marx's theory of social development. As it turns out, the *Origin* remains far closer to *Ancient Society* than Engels intended.

Chapter 2, 'The Family', constituting about one-third of the *Origin*, presents a reworked and augmented version of Morgan's sequence of family-types. Engels underscores the importance of Morgan's discovery of this history and takes the opportunity to situate Morgan's work in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century speculations concerning primate-evolution, early human social behavior, and the possibility of a primitive state of promiscuous sexual intercourse. Concluding these half-dozen pages with the observation that bourgeois moral standards cannot be used to interpret primitive societies, he quickly summarises and comments on Morgan's discussion of the two hypothetical forms of group-marriage.[19] Like Morgan, he believes that natural selection, through the innate mechanisms of jealousy and incest-taboos, triggered the succession of family-types. In addition, the logic behind the change Marx had made in Morgan's sequence of presentation now becomes clear, for Engels is able to explain the origin of the clan-system in the course of his description of the punaluan family.

Having disposed of group-marriage and the genesis of the clan, Engels turns to the pairing and patriarchal families. He selectively summarises Morgan's findings, at the same time integrating material Morgan had covered in his chapter on property. Along with Morgan, Johann Jakob Bachofen, and others, Engels assumes that supremacy of women characterised primitive societies, but he argues that it rested on the material foundation of a natural sex-division of labour within the primitive communistic household. Only if 'new, *social* forces' caused that natural material foundation to take a different form could women lose their position of independence.[20] And this occurred when society began to produce a sizable surplus, making it possible for wealth to amass and eventually pass into the private possession of families. Like Morgan, Engels sees the development of productivity as an automatically evolving process, but he makes a distinction, however vaguely, between wealth, a given accumulation of things, and private property, a social relation.

Once wealth is held privately, its accumulation becomes a central social issue. 'Mother right', that is, descent in the female line and, along with it, the supremacy of women in the communal household, now constitutes a barrier to social development. Earlier, the supposedly natural division of labour between women and men placed women in charge of the household while men had the task of providing food. In a society at a low level of productivity, therefore, women

19. Engels 1972, pp. 101–10.
20. Engels 1972, p. 117.

possessed the household-goods, and men the instruments necessary to hunt, fish, cultivate plants, and the like. With increasing productivity and the development of private property in land, cattle, and slaves, this historical accident, as it were, has the grim consequence that men, the former possessors of the instruments of gathering and producing food, now own the wealth. Mother right makes it impossible, however, for men to transmit the newly evolved private property to their children. 'Mother right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was'.[21]

Engels regards the shift to the patrilineal clan-system as pivotal in its impact on society and on women's position. It marks the establishment of a set of social relations conducive to the further evolution not only of private property but of full-scale class-society. More dramatically, 'the overthrow of mother right was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children'.[22] The patriarchal family, with its incorporation of slaves and servants under the supreme authority of the male head, now emerges as a form intermediate between the pairing family and monogamy. Engels offers specific historical examples of this transition-stage, emphasising the relationship between land-tenure and social structure, as well as the brutality of the patriarch toward women in the household.

In discussing the monogamous family, Engels again follows Morgan while simultaneously incorporating a clearer analysis of property-relations and focusing on the question of woman's position. The monogamous family appears toward the end of the second stage in the development of the arts of subsistence – that is, at the threshold of civilisation – and represents a perfected form for the transmission of private property from father to children. Engels emphasises the origin of the monogamous family in economic conditions and its function as a property-holding institution. 'It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property'.[23] Although Engels never states it unambiguously, the implication is that the form of the monogamous, as well as the patriarchal, family constitutes a product of the rise of class-society.

Engels has no illusions about the position of women in the monogamous family. Monogamy is a standard enforced on the woman only, and exists solely to guarantee the paternity of the offspring, not for any reasons of love or affection. Men remain free to live by a different standard. At the same time, the phenomenon of the neglected wife begets its own consequences. Thus, side by side with

21. Engels 1972, pp. 119–20.
22. Engels 1972, pp. 120–1.
23. Engels 1972, p. 128.

the institution of so-called monogamous marriage flourishes all manner of adultery and prostitution. Furthermore, 'monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period'. In Engels's formulation, this struggle between the sexes appears simultaneously with class-relations. 'The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male'. Contrary to a common misinterpretation of these remarks, Engels does not assert that the sex-struggle antedates class-conflict. Neither, however, does he clearly argue that it is rooted in the emergence of class-society. He simply treats the two developments as parallel, skirting the difficult problems of historical origins and theoretical relationships.[24]

With the basic character of monogamous marriage established, Engels turns briefly to a number of topics not addressed by Morgan. To start, he presents a quick history of the monogamous family's development in the period of civilisation, with emphasis on the extent to which it fostered 'individual sex love'. According to Engels, love-based marriages were impossible prior to the great 'moral advance' constituted by the monogamous family. Moreover, in all ruling classes, even after the rise of the monogamous family, expedience rather than love governed the choice of marriage-partner. After a brief glance at the medieval ruling-class family, Engels focuses on marriage in capitalist society. Among the bourgeoisie, marriage is a matter of convenience, generally arranged by parents to further their property-interests. By contrast, the proletariat has the opportunity to truly experience individual sex-love. Among the proletariat, 'all the foundations of typical monogamy are cleared away. Here there is no property, for the preservation and inheritance of which monogamy and male supremacy were established; hence there is no incentive to make this male supremacy effective . . . Here quite other personal and social conditions decide'. Moreover, Engels believes that with the increasing employment of women in wage-labour, and women's accompanying independence, no basis survives for any kind of male-supremacy in the working-class household, 'except, perhaps, for something of the brutality toward women that has spread since the introduction of monogamy'.[25] Engels's optimism, shared by Marx and the socialist movement of the period, is problematic on three counts. First, it misses the significance of the working-class household as an essential social unit, not for the holding of property but for the reproduction of the working class itself. Second, it overlooks the ways in which a material basis for male supremacy is constituted within the

24. Engels 1972, pp. 128, 129.
25. Engels 1972, pp. 132, 135.

proletarian household. And third, it vastly underestimates the variety of ideological and psychological factors that provide a continuing foundation for male-supremacy in the working-class family.

Most of Engels's brief discussion of the situation of women within the family in capitalist society is framed in terms of the gap between formal and substantive equality.[26] He begins with an analogy between the marriage-contract and the labour-contract. Both are freely entered into, juridically speaking, thereby making the partners equal on paper. This formal equality disguises, in the case of the labour contract, the differences in class-position between the worker and the employer. The marriage contract involves a similar mystification since, in the case of a propertied family, parents actually determine the choice of children's marriage-partners. In fact, the legal equality of the partners in a marriage is in sharp contrast with their actual inequality. The issue, here, concerns the nature of the wife's labour within the household. The development of the patriarchal and monogamous families converts such family-labour into a private service. As Engels puts it, 'the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production'. Her work loses the public or socially necessary place it had held in earlier societies. Both excluded and, later, economically dependent, she therefore becomes subordinate. Only with large-scale capitalist industry, and only for the proletarian woman, does the possibility appear for re-entry into production. Yet this opportunity has a contradictory character so long as capitalist relations endure. If the proletarian wife 'carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties'.[27]

Engels's conclusions regarding the conditions for women's liberation, summarised in a few paragraphs, generally converge with the equally brief remarks on the subject made by Marx in *Capital*. Like Marx, Engels underscores the progressive role that participation in the collective labour-process can potentially play, and its crucial importance as a condition for human-liberation. Whereas Marx had embedded his comments in an analysis of the historical impact of capitalist large-scale industry, Engels places his observations in the context of a discussion of political rights. He again draws an analogy between workers and women, arguing that both groups must have legal equality if they are to understand the character of their respective fights for 'real social equality'. 'The democratic republic does not do away with the opposition of [the proletariat and the capitalist class]; on the contrary, it provides the clear field on which the fight can be fought out. And in the same way, the peculiar character of the supremacy of

26. Engels 1972, pp. 135–8.
27. Engels 1972, p. 137.

the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights.'[28]

Although generally consistent with Marx's sketch of the reproduction of labour-power, Engels's consideration of women's oppression is flawed or incomplete in several critical respects. In the first place, he assumes that it is natural for 'family duties' to be the exclusive province of women, and that therefore they always will be. Furthermore, he does not clearly link the development of a special sphere associated with the reproduction of labour power to the emergence of class-, or, perhaps, capitalist society. For pre-capitalist class-societies, he fails to specify the nature of women's subordination in different classes. Finally, Engels's emphasis on the strategic importance of democratic rights leaves open the question of the relationship between socialist revolution, women's liberation, and the struggle for equal rights. The result is ambiguous, potentially suggesting that the socialist programme for women's liberation consists of two discrete objectives: equal rights with men in the still-capitalist short term; and full liberation on the basis of a higher form of the family in the far distant revolutionary millennium.

Engels closes the chapter on the family with a long look to the future.[29] These pages trace, yet again, the development of monogamy on the basis of private property, and attempt a sketch of family-experience in a society in which the means of production have been converted into social property. True monogamy, that is, monogamy for the man as well as the woman, will now be possible, along with wide development of that highest of intimate emotions, individual sex-love. Exactly what relations between the sexes will look like cannot be predicted, for it is up to a new generation of women and men born and raised in socialist society. 'When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual – and that will be the end of it'. Engels's focus on the emotional and sexual content of inter-personal relations within the family-household reflected a common view that they represent the essence of the so-called woman-question.[30]

Only at one point in this section does he dwell on the implications of the future abolition of the family's economic functions, observing that with the means of production held in common, 'the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry'.

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28. Ibid.
29. Engels 1972, pp. 138–46.
30. Engels 1972, p. 145. The subjects of love and sexuality are covered at even greater length by Bebel in Bebel 1971.

Moreover, 'the care and education of the children becomes a public affair'.[31] These brief hints offer the barest programmatic guidance, and do not differ, in substance, from nineteenth-century communitarian proposals. In short, Engels's chapter on the family in the *Origin* remains an unintegrated mix of Morgan's dry materialism and a radical view of sexual liberation – seasoned with genuine insights into the nature of property- and social-relations, and liberally sprinkled with Engels's warmth and wit.

In Chapters 3–8 of the *Origin*, corresponding to the section on government in Morgan's *Ancient Society*, Engels examines the nature of clan-society and traces the rise of the state. As in Chapter 2 on the family, he follows Morgan's general line of argument, while at the same time focusing it and integrating the material on property. In Engels's words, the changes 'in form' between the institutions of the gentile constitution and those of the state 'have been outlined by Morgan, but their economic content and cause must largely be added by myself'.[32] The resulting discussion suffers from defects similar to those already observed in Engels's account of the family. Moreover, it becomes more obvious in these chapters that Engels identifies private property and the market-exchange of commodities as the pivotal social developments in history. Nowhere, however, does he clearly discuss these phenomena in terms of the social relations that constitute the mode of production in which they originate.

In these chapters, a critique of property takes the place of a critique of class-relations. Property, not exploitation – the appropriation of the surplus-labour of the producing class by another class – becomes the implicit object of class struggle. From the point of view of Marx's theory of social reproduction, however, both private property and commodity-exchange only represent specific manifestations of particular types of class-society. In such societies, a given set of relations of exploitation always dominates, constituting the basis for specific social relations and forms of private property, the market, the state, and so forth. The difference between this formulation and that in the *Origin* is crucial, and not simply a matter of style or manner of exposition. It reveals that the arguments put forth by Engels in the *Origin* generally remain within the theoretical framework of a utopian critique of property. Marx's comments about his favorite utopian-socialist target, Proudhon, would apply equally to Engels: he should have analysed '*property relations* as a whole, not in their *legal* expression as *relations of volition* but in their real form, that is, as *relations of production*. [Instead,] he has entangled the whole of these economic relations in the general juristic conception of "*property*"'. Furthermore, Engels has confused the

31. Engels 1972, p. 139.
32. Engels 1972, p. 171.

circumstance that the products of labour are exchanged in a society, with the presence of capitalist, or at least class-, relations of production.[33]

In the *Origin*'s closing Chapter 9, 'Barbarism and Civilization', Engels examines the 'general economic conditions' behind the developments presented in previous chapters. 'Here', he observes, 'we shall need Marx's *Capital* as much as Morgan's book'.[34] Unfortunately, it is already far too late, for the analytical weaknesses encountered throughout the *Origin* permeate this highly repetitive chapter.

Engels restates his account of social evolution in the period of the decline of clan-society and the emergence of civilisation, this time pointing out a series of major milestones. In the middle-stages of barbarism, the separation of pastoral tribes from the mass of other peoples marks the 'first great social division of labor'. These tribes tame animals and develop agriculture; as a result they soon find themselves with products that make regular exchange possible. Inevitably and automatically, the increasing exchange leads to higher productivity, more wealth, and a society in which the harnessing of surplus-labour becomes feasible. Hence, slavery appears. 'From the first great social division of labor arose the first great cleavage of society into two classes: masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited'. Engels reminds the reader that the change in the division of labour also has consequences for relations between the sexes in the family. Because the pre-existing division of labour had supposedly assigned the task of procuring subsistence to men, men become the holders of the new wealth, and women find themselves subordinated and confined to private domestic labour. A 'second great division of labor' occurs at the close of the period of barbarism, when handicraft separates from agriculture. On this basis, a new cleavage of society into classes develops, the opposition between rich and poor. Inequalities of property among individual male heads of families now lead to the break up of the communal household, and the pairing marriage dissolves into the monogamous single family, even more oppressive to women. Finally, a third division of labour emerges in the period of civilisation: a class of merchants arises, parasites whose nefarious activities lead to periodic trade-crises. In the meantime, the rise of class-cleavages has necessitated replacement of the gentile constitution with a third force, powerful but apparently above the class-struggle – namely, the state.[35]

In sum, the concluding chapter of the *Origin* argues that civilisation results from the continual evolution of the division of labour, which in turn gives rise to

33. Marx to J. D. Schweitzer, 24 January 1865; Marx and Engels 1965, p. 153. Marx 1971a, pp. 115–16, 165–7.
34. Engels 1972, p. 217.
35. Engels 1972, pp. 218–25.

exchange, commodity-production, class-cleavages, the subordination of women, the single family as the economic unit of society, and the state. What is wrong with this picture is that Engels has once again simply listed phenomena without rooting them in social relations and the workings of a dominant mode of production. Moreover, he awards the leading role to the technical division of labour in the labour-process – what Morgan had considered under the rubric 'arts of subsistence'. The development of class-cleavages, that is, of exploitative social relations, simply follows automatically, once a certain level of material productivity is reached. In other words, the state of the forces of production mechanistically determines the nature of the relations of production. The emphasis on the technical division of labour in this chapter constitutes a new element, tending somewhat to replace the focus in earlier chapters on the rise of private property as the prime mover of social change. At the same time, Engels, like Morgan, often invokes innate human greed and competitiveness to explain historical development.[36] All in all, the scattered analysis of social development presented in this final chapter represents some of the weakest reasoning in the *Origin*.

Not surprisingly, the *Origin*'s summary comments in this chapter on the emancipation of women exhibit similar ambiguities. Engels emphasises, yet again, the crushing impact made by the 'first great social division of labor' on women's position, and then leaps to a supposedly self-evident conclusion:

> We can already see from this that to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labour and restricted to private domestic labour. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time. And only now has that become possible through modern large-scale industry, which does not merely permit the employment of female labour over a wide range, but positively demands it, while it also tends toward ending private domestic labour by changing it more and more into a public industry.[37]

As in the chapter on the family, Engels here assumes that domestic labour is purely women's work, does not locate his statement with respect to a specific class-society, and blurs the relationship between women's eventual liberation in communist society and immediate strategic goals.

Engels formulates the relationship between social transformation and women's equality more specifically in a letter written in 1885: 'It is my conviction that real equality of women and men can come true only when the exploitation of either

36. Engels 1972, pp. 223, 224, 235; see also pp. 119, 161.
37. Engels 1972, p. 221.

by capital has been abolished and private housework has been transformed into a public industry'. In the meantime, protective legislation is necessary. 'That the working woman needs special protection against capitalist exploitation because of her special physiological functions seems obvious to me . . . I admit I am more interested in the health of the future generations than in the absolute formal equality of the sexes during the last years of the capitalist mode of production'.[38] Once again, Engels wrestles with the problem of distinguishing juridical equality from real social equality.

Engels made one argument in the *Origin* that the socialist movement later refused to endorse, but which has recently been taken up by theorists of the contemporary women's liberation movement. In a frequently cited passage from the 1884 preface to the *Origin*, Engels spoke of two types of production proceeding in parallel: on the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, and on the other, the production of human beings. The dualistic formulation strikingly recalls the never published *German Ideology* of 1846, in which Marx and Engels had suggested a similar characterisation of the dual essence of social reproduction: 'The production of life, both of one's own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, . . . appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation'.[39]

The dependence of the *Origin* on the forty-year-old *German Ideology* is not limited to this dramatic linguistic parallel. Engels drew quite heavily on the forgotten manuscript of his and Marx's youth, which he had just rediscovered among Marx's papers.[40] Thus, both texts make a relatively sharp distinction between natural and social phenomena, emphasising the purely biological or animal-like character of procreation. Furthermore, *The German Ideology* assigns, as does the *Origin*, a central motivating role in social development to the continual evolution of the division of labour. According to *The German Ideology*, society develops in stages, beginning from the simplest forms, in which the only division of labour is natural, and rooted in the sexual act. With the growth of the division of labour, social relations distinguish themselves from natural ones, and the 'family relation' becomes subordinate. Both *The German Ideology* and the *Origin* refer to the development, at this point in history, of a relationship of latent slavery within the family, representing 'the first form of property'.[41] Finally, both texts

38. Engels to Gertrude Guillaume-Schak, 5 July 1885, Marx and Engels 1965, p. 386.
39. Engels 1972, pp. 71–2; text of passage cited in Chapter 3 of Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 43.
40. Marx und Engels 1956b, pp. 33–4; see also pp. 39, 41, and 54, and Engels 1972, p. 129. For *The German Ideology*, see Chapter 4. On the textual similarity, see also Geiger 1968, pp. 30–2.
41. Marx and Engels 1975a, pp. 33, 46; Engels 1972, pp. 121, 134, 137.

put forth an equivocal image of the family as a germ or nucleus within which larger social contradictions originate or are reflected, and which itself constitutes the fundamental building block of society.[42]

Engels's extensive reliance on *The German Ideology* has the effect of importing into the *Origin* many of the theoretical weaknesses of the earlier manuscript. In 1846, when Marx and Engels composed *The German Ideology*, they had been on the threshold of two lifetimes of profound contributions to the socialist movement. The manuscript bears, nonetheless, the marks of its very early place in their development. Thus when Engels, in the preface to the *Origin*, echoes the dichotomy suggested in *The German Ideology* by positing two separate systems of production of material life, he simply takes a very primitive distinction between natural and social phenomena to its logical conclusion. His return to this dichotomy, long after he, and even more so Marx, had generally transcended it in subsequent work, epitomises the theoretical ambiguity found throughout the *Origin*. Socialists at the turn of the century found the preface's assertion concerning the duality of social reproduction 'very remarkable', indeed, 'almost incomprehensible'. Soviet commentators eventually settled on the view that Engels was mistaken, and that the statement can only refer to the very earliest period of human history, when people were supposedly so much a part of nature that social relations of production could not be said to exist.[43] What disturbed these theorists was the implication that the family represents an autonomous, if not wholly independent, centre of social development. And it is precisely this implication that has caught the imagination of contemporary socialist feminists, often tempting them into a quite cavalier reading of the *Origin*.

Engels's purpose in writing the *Origin* was 'to present the results of Morgan's researches in the light of the conclusions of [Marx's] materialist examination of history, and thus to make clear their full significance'.[44] Engels's treatment of the material falls short, however, of this goal, for he only partially transforms Morgan's crude materialism. The *Origin* is marred throughout by Engels's failure to base the discussion on an adequate exposition of Marx's theory of social development. Instead, Engels relies, quite erratically, on several theoretical frameworks in addition to his understanding of Marx's work: the technological determinism implicit in Morgan's *Ancient Society*, his main source of data; *The German Ideology*'s early version of historical materialism; and a generally

42. Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 46; Engels 1972, pp. 121–2, 129, 131, 137.

43. On the turn-of-the-century socialists, see Geiger 1968, pp. 31–2; similar opinions have been expressed more recently in Hindess and Hirst 1975, pp. 58–9. On the Soviet view, see Stern 1948, p. 48, n. 10. For other critiques of the dualism implicit in the *Origin*, see Brown 1979 and O'Laughlin 1975, pp. 5–7.

44. Engels 1972, p. 71.

utopian critique of property and view of the socialist future. While the *Origin* manages, in places, to rise above this eclecticism, its theoretical weaknesses and omissions were to have serious consequences. The *Origin* constituted a defective text whose ambiguous theoretical and political formulations nevertheless became an integral part of the socialist legacy.

Part Three

The Socialist Movement

Chapter Seven
The Second International

In the quarter of a century that preceded World-War, a powerful working-class movement, represented by trade-unions and socialist parties, arose in virtually every European country. The new working-class parties shared a commitment, however abstract, to the eventual transformation of capitalist society into classless communism. At the same time, they fought for the extension of suffrage to workers and sometimes to women, ran impressive and often quite successful electoral campaigns, and pushed legislation to better working conditions and insure working people against sickness, disability, and unemployment. Above all, they encouraged the organisation of workers into trade-unions to bargain directly with employers and, if necessary, strike. Chief among the socialist parties stood the German Social Democratic party, the SPD – presumed heir to the mantle of Marx and Engels, leader of the German trade-union movement, and able, at its height, to boast of four and a half million votes and over one million party members.

By 1889, the foundation had been laid for the Second International, a body that sought to co-ordinate discussion among and action by the various national parties. In theory, socialism and the goal of a classless communist society constituted supremely international tasks, the more so as capitalism developed into a full-scale imperialist system. In practice, the individual working-class movements and their parties responded to conditions of an essentially national character, and generally trod along separate, if parallel paths. When

war broke out in 1914, these paths diverged. With a few important exceptions, the International splintered along the lines of opposing armies.

For the socialist movement, the problem of women's oppression was, in principle, an inseparable part of what was called the 'social question'. Socialist parties took up the so-called woman-question in party-newspapers, and also produced a modest amount of theoretical and agitational literature. With some reluctance, they incorporated women's political rights in their programmes, sought to build mass women's movements, and encouraged trade-unions to organise women workers. Despite weaknesses, the socialist movement offered the most sustained and thoroughgoing support then available to the struggle for sex-equality and women's liberation. At the same time, examination of some examples of party-literature on the woman-question suggests that for the most part, the Second International failed to clarify, much less extend, the incomplete legacy of theoretical work left by Marx and Engels. Moreover, by codifying and in some measure sanctifying this legacy, the socialist movement actually hampered its ability to move beyond inherited ambiguities.

Among party and trade-union militants able to find time to read socialist books, *Woman and Socialism*, by the German Social-Democratic leader August Bebel, ranked first in popularity. Originally published in 1879, by 1895 it had gone through 25 editions, and by 1910, 50, not to mention numerous foreign translations. For years, *Woman and Socialism* was the book most borrowed from workers' libraries in Germany, and it continued to serve as a major socialist primer into the first decades of the twentieth century.

What was it that so persistently drew workers and socialists to a book nearly five hundred pages long? In the first place, *Woman*, as the German movement dubbed the book, was virtually the only work in the Marxist literature of the period that spoke to people's desire for a detailed and specific picture of the socialist future. Scanning the oppressive past and dissecting the capitalist present, the book also devoted whole sections to sketching the general outlines of what life in the socialist society to come might be like. 'It is quite safe to say', observed a library-journal in 1910, 'that it was from this book that the proletarian masses derived their socialism'. And years later, a party-activist reminisced that 'for us young socialists Bebel's book was not just a programme, it was a gospel'. Until the Bolshevik Revolution opened up the possibility of a real-life example, *Woman* offered the most developed vision of what socialists were fighting for.[1]

But the book was not just about socialism, it was also about women – *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*, as the title of the second edition announced. For

1. On the popularity of Bebel's book as a vision of socialism, see Steinberg 1976.

some readers, it documented the anguish of their own experience as women, inspiring 'hope and joy to live and fight'. With these words, Ottilie Baader, a working-class woman, recalled the impact the book had on her when she encountered it in 1887 at the age of forty, living 'resigned and without hope' under the burden of 'life's bitter needs, overwork, and bourgeois family morality':

> Although I was not a Social Democrat I had friends who belonged to the party. Through them I got the precious work. I read it nights through. It was my own fate and that of thousands of my sisters. Neither in the family nor in public life had I ever heard of all the pain the woman must endure. One ignored her life. Bebel's book courageously broke with the old secretiveness . . . I read the book not once but ten times. Because everything was so new, it took considerable effort to come to grips with Bebel's views. I had to break with so many things that I had previously regarded as correct.

Baader went on to join the party and take an active role in its political life.[2]

For certain militants within the German Social-Democratic Party, the publication of *Woman and Socialism* had a further meaning. Clara Zetkin, for instance, observed in 1896 that Bebel's book, irrespective of any defects, 'must be judged by the time at which it appeared. And it was then more than a book, it was an event, a deed', for it provided party-members with a demonstration of the relationship between the subordination of women and the development of society. Zetkin interpreted the publication of Bebel's work as a symbol of the Party's practical commitment to developing women as socialist activists. 'For the first time', she noted, 'from this book issued the watchword: We can conquer the future only if we win the women as co-fighters'.[3]

As *Woman* progressed through edition after edition, Bebel continually revised and enlarged its text. The first edition, totalling only 180 pages and not subdivided into chapters, appeared just after the German government attempted to crack down on the growing socialist movement by banning the SPD and instituting severe censorship. Despite the book's illegal status, it sold out in a matter of months. Not until 1883 was Bebel to locate another publisher willing to produce the book, as well as find time to expand and revise it. In an unsuccessful attempt to get around the anti-socialist laws, he re-titled the 220-page second edition *Woman in the Past, Present and Future*, a change corresponding to the new chapter-structure. Although the authorities nevertheless banned the book, it was once again an immediate success and quickly sold out, as did six subsequent editions in the following years. In 1890, the anti-socialist laws were lifted, and Bebel prepared a substantially reworked ninth edition, which appeared early in 1891.

2. Quataert 1979, p. 120.
3. For Zetkin's remark, see Draper and Lipow 1976, pp. 197–8.

Re-christened *Woman and Socialism*, and expanded to 384 pages, the ninth edition also incorporated, for the first time, parts of Engels's analysis from the *Origin*. It was this version of *Woman*, repeatedly reprinted, and in 1895 further extended to 472 pages for its 25th edition, that became the socialist classic.

The German-speaking socialist movement thus had the distinction of producing two major works on the question of women's oppression within a span of only a few years: the first, Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, by a major leader of the powerful German socialist party, the second, Engels's *Origin*, published in 1884, by Marx's collaborator, now a tremendously respected but somewhat isolated figure, living in political exile. Given the convergence of subject matter and politics in the two books, one would expect the voluminous correspondence between the authors to include a substantial exchange of views on the issues. Instead, a strange silence reigns, punctured by a few casual comments. On 18 January 1884, Engels thanks Bebel for sending him a copy of the second edition of *Woman*. 'I have read it with great interest', he notes, 'it contains much valuable material. Especially lucid and fine is what you say about the development of industry in Germany'. On 6 June, he mentions the forthcoming publication of the *Origin*, and promises to send Bebel a copy. On 1–2 May 1891, he notes his desire to prepare a new edition of the *Origin*, which he did that June. Bebel's letters to Engels mention his own book only in the context of problems arising with the English translation, and do not refer to the *Origin* at all. Engels's letters to other correspondents document the *Origin*'s conception, writing, and preparation for publication during the first five months of 1884, but say nothing about his opinion of Bebel's work. The impression remains of a silent polemic between differing views. Despite his special relationship to the socialist movement, Engels probably judged it tactically unwise to do more than publish the *Origin*, and hope it would be recognised as the more accurate approach to the issue of women's oppression.[4]

Bebel divides *Woman and Socialism* into three major sections, 'Woman in the Past', 'Woman in the Present', and 'Woman in the Future'. Most of the constant textual revision in successive printings consists of changes of a factual nature, made to deepen and update the arguments. Only the publication of Engels's *Origin* required Bebel to make substantial modifications, which he largely confined to the first section. In the early version of 'Woman in the Past', he had presented an abundance of ethnographic evidence in rather disorganised fashion, under the assumption that 'although the forms of [woman's] oppression have varied, the oppression has always remained the same'.

4. The correspondence between Bebel and Engels appears in Blumenberg (ed.) 1965, nos. 58, 59, 62, 80, 157, 280, 298. Engels's letters to other correspondents are listed in Krader 1972, pp. 388–90. See also the discussion of Engels's *Origin* in Chapter 6.

Engels's work made him realise the inaccuracy of this statement, and, as he later put it, enabled him to place the historical material on a correct foundation. Bebel entirely recast the section in order to argue that relations between the sexes, like all social relations, 'have materially changed in the previous course of human development . . . in even step with the existing systems of production, on the one hand, and of the distribution of the products of labor, on the other'. With the aid of the *Origin*, he was now able to present the ethnographic material in the context of a more systematic sketch of the history of the development of the family, private property, the state, and capitalism. These changes hardly affected, however, Bebel's analysis in the rest of the book.[5]

The section 'Woman in the Present' makes up the bulk of *Woman and Socialism*. It includes two long chapters on the current crisis of capitalism and on the nature of socialist society ('The State and Society' and 'The Socialization of Society'). These chapters, as well as the four sections that close the book – 'Woman in the Future', 'Internationality', 'Population and Over-Population', and 'Conclusion' – barely touch on the situation of women. In other words, despite its title and chapter headings, over a third of *Woman and Socialism* focuses on the larger 'social question'. No wonder so many socialists read the book more as a sort of inspirational general text than as a specific study on the question of women.

The strengths of *Woman and Socialism* lie precisely in its powerful indictment of capitalist society, and the contrasting image it presents of a socialist future. As detail follows detail and compelling anecdotes multiply, Bebel assembles a mass of information on virtually every aspect of women's subordination and the social question in general. In capitalist society, marriage and sexuality have acquired a distorted, unnatural character. 'The marriage founded upon bourgeois property relations, is more or less a marriage by compulsion, which leads numerous ills in its train'. Sexual repression results in mental illness and suicide. Sex without love is also damaging, for 'man is no animal. Mere physical satisfaction does not suffice'. Where 'the blending of the sexes is a purely mechanical act: such a marriage is immoral'. The counterpart to loveless marriages based on economic constraint is prostitution, which 'becomes a social institution in the capitalist world, the same as the police, standing armies, the Church, and wage-mastership'.[6] Women's presumed natural calling as mothers, wives, and sexual providers results in

5. For the history of the early editions of *Woman and Socialism*, see Bebel's 'Vorrede zur neunten Auflage', dated 24 December 1890, in Bebel 1891. The following discussion cites the easily available English translations of the second and 33rd editions to stand for, respectively, the early version and the classic text of *Woman and Socialism*. The second edition is Bebel 1976, the 33rd is Bebel 1971, cited hereafter as *Woman*. Citations in this paragraph are from Bebel 1976, p. 18, and Bebel 1971, p. 10. For a useful evaluation of Bebel's work, see Evans 1977, pp. 156–9.

6. Bebel 1971, pp. 85, 86, 146.

discrimination against them as workers. Given the widespread employment of women, often under the most arduous conditions, it is easy for Bebel to document the hypocrisy of such prejudice. 'The men of the upper classes look down upon the lower; and so does almost the whole sex upon woman. The majority of men see in woman only an article of profit and pleasure; to acknowledge her an equal runs against the grain of their prejudices. . . . What absurdity, is it not, to speak of the 'equality of all' and yet seek to keep one-half of the human race outside of the pale!' Bebel insists, moreover, that industrial development tends to free women. In general, '*the whole trend of society is to lead woman out of the narrow sphere of strictly domestic life to a full participation in the public life of the people*'. But so long as capitalism survives, woman 'suffers both as a social and a sex entity, and it is hard to say in which of the two respects she suffers more'.[7]

Bebel portrays socialism as a happy paradise, free of the conflicts that typify capitalist society, and only concerned with the welfare of the people. His comments are far more concrete and programmatic than anything suggested by Marx and Engels. He envisions a society in which everyone works and all are equal. Democratic administrative bodies replace the organised class-power of the state. Marriages based on free choice prevail, offering both partners supportive intimacy, time to enjoy their children, and opportunities for wider participation in social and political life. Sexuality develops freely, for 'the individual shall himself oversee the satisfaction of his own instincts. *The satisfaction of the sexual instinct is as much a private concern as the satisfaction of any other natural instinct*'. Amenities presently available only to the privileged few are extended to the working class. Education and health-care are assured, as well as pleasant working and living conditions. Domestic labour is socialised, as far as possible, by means of large, hotel-like apartment-buildings, with central heating and plumbing, and electric power. Central kitchens, laundries, and cleaning services make individual facilities obsolete. After all, 'the small private kitchen is, just like the workshop of the small master mechanic, a transition stage, an arrangement by which time, power and material are senselessly squandered and wasted'.[8] At the same time, the darker aspects of capitalist society disappear: sexual repression, prostitution, deteriorating family-life, dangerous working conditions, inefficient productive methods, goods of low quality, divisions between mental and manual labour and between city and country, and so forth. Above all the individual has an abundance of free choice and develops himself or herself to the fullest in all possible areas: work, leisure, sexuality, and love.

Throughout *Woman and Socialism*, Bebel challenges the assumption that existing sex-divisions of labour represent natural phenomena.

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7. Bebel 1971, pp. 192, 187, 79.
8. Bebel 1971, pp. 343, 338–9. On kitchenless houses, see Hayden 1981.

What is natural, he says, is the sexual instinct itself. Indeed, 'of all the natural impulses human beings are instinct with, along with that of eating and drinking, the sexual impulse is the strongest'. Despite a fairly simplistic view of instinct, Bebel's lengthy attack on the notion of eternally fixed sex-divisions of labour stands out as an important political contribution to the socialist movement. For once a socialist leader confronted the ideological character of claims about the social consequences of physiological sex-differences.[9]

With all its strengths, *Woman and Socialism* nevertheless suffers from a seriously impoverished theoretical apparatus, as well as various political defects. Bebel's theoretical perspective actually consists of an eclectic mix of two major trends within the socialist tradition, trends against which Marx himself had often struggled. On the one hand, *Woman and Socialism* reflects a utopian-socialist outlook reminiscent of Fourier and other early nineteenth-century socialists, particularly in its view of individual development within a communitarian context. And on the other, the book exhibits a mechanical and incipiently reformist interpretation of Marxism, thus heralding the severe reformism that overran most parties in the Second International by the turn of the century. Lacking an adequate theoretical foundation, Bebel's discussion of women's oppression and liberation follows an erratic and sometimes contradictory course. From the start, he conceptualises the issues in terms of the free development of the female individual. 'The so-called "Woman Question" . . . concerns the position that woman should occupy in our social organism; how she may unfold her powers and faculties in all directions, to the end that she become a complete and useful member of human society, enjoying equal rights with all'. In the present, capitalist society stamps every facet of women's experience with oppression and inequality. 'The mass of the female sex suffers in two respects: On the one side woman suffers from economic and social dependence upon man. True enough, this dependence may be alleviated by formally placing her upon an equality before the law, and in point of rights; but the dependence is not removed. On the other side, woman suffers from the economic dependence that woman in general, the workingwoman in particular, finds herself in, along with the workingman'. Equality and liberation are thus always social as well as individual issues, and Bebel hastens to add that the 'solution of the Woman Question coincides completely with the solution of the Social Question' – incidentally putting the final resolution of the question into the far future.[10] Meanwhile, the working class, and not the bourgeois feminist movement, constitutes women's natural strategic ally in the struggle. Moreover, participation in the revolutionary movement enables 'more favorable relations between husband and wife [to] spring up in the rank of the

9. Bebel 1971, p. 79: see also pp. 79–88, 182–215.
10. Bebel 1971, pp. 1, 4, 5.

working class in the measure that both realize they are tugging at the same rope, and there is but one means towards satisfactory conditions for themselves and their family – the radical reformation of society that shall make human beings of them all'.[11]

Insofar as Bebel considers the social source for the pervasive oppression of women, he relies on the concept of dependence. In general, he asserts, 'all social dependence and oppression [have their] roots in the *economic dependence* of the oppressed upon the oppressor'. Thus, woman's oppression is founded on her dependence upon men. 'Economically and socially unfree' in capitalist society, for instance, woman 'is bound to see in marriage her means of support; accordingly, she depends upon man and becomes a piece of property to him.' If oppression has its basis in personal dependence, then liberation in the socialist future must involve the individual's independence. 'The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of dominion and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot'.[12] Apart from carrying the bewildering theoretical implication that chattel-slavery systematically characterises capitalism since every wife must be 'a piece of property', statements such as these show that Bebel has lost touch with the essence of Marx's orientation. For Marx, class-struggle within a specific mode of production constitutes the basis of social development, and individual oppression has its root, therefore, in a particular set of exploitative social relations that operate at the level of classes. Bebel, caught up in the reformist tendencies of his time, replaces Marx's concept of class-exploitation with the vague and far less confrontational notion of dependence, particularly the dependence of the individual on others. Social well-being is measured, then, by the location of the individual on a scale ranging from dependence to independence, not by the nature of the social relations of production in a given society. Similarly, socialism is pictured largely in terms of the redistribution of goods and services already available in capitalist society to independent individuals, rather than in terms of the wholesale reorganisation of production and social relations. Despite Bebel's commitment to socialism, his emphasis on the full development of the individual in future society recalls nothing so much as liberalism, the political philosophy of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

It is the focus on individual dependence, viewed largely in isolation from the mechanisms governing social development as a whole, that undermines Bebel's strategic perspective. In *Woman and Socialism*, women's oppression is treated as an important but theoretically muddled problem, and it is hardly surprising that Bebel comes up with a variety of implicitly contradictory strategic approaches.

11. Bebel 1971, p. 115; see also pp. 89–90 and 233.
12. Bebel 1971, pp. 9, 120, 343.

In the first place, he often insists that the complete resolution of the problem must be postponed to the revolutionary future, when it can be fully addressed in the context of solving the social question. Nevertheless, practical work on the issue remains critical in the present. At the same time, it somehow becomes subsumed in the working-class movement's struggle against capitalism. Finally, Bebel often pictures the solution to the so-called woman-question in terms of achieving equal rights to participate in society without distinction of sex. This approach fails to differentiate socialist aims from the liberal-feminist goal of sex-equality in capitalist society. In short, Bebel could not, despite his best socialist intentions, sufficiently specify the relationship between the liberation of women in the communist future and the struggle for equality in the capitalist present. He conceptualised the so-called woman-question as an issue pertaining to woman's situation as an individual, on the one hand, and to social conditions in general, on the other, but he was unable to construct a reliable bridge between the two levels of analysis.

The popularity of *Woman and Socialism* reflected the consolidation within the Second International of a definite position on the question of women, Engels's low-key and rather ambiguous opposition in the *Origin* notwithstanding. Insofar as the socialist movement took up the problems of women's oppression, it spontaneously embraced Bebel's analysis.

In England, for example, Eleanor Marx – Marx's youngest daughter and an active participant in the British labour- and socialist movements – wrote with her husband, Edward Aveling, a pamphlet entitled *The Woman Question*.[13] First published in 1886, and reprinted in 1887, the popular pamphlet took the form of a speculative review of the recently published English edition of Bebel's *Woman*. Its 16 pages represented 'an attempt to explain the position of Socialists in respect to the woman question'.

Like Bebel's *Woman, The Woman Question* focuses on issues of love, sexuality, and human feeling, while at the same time challenging the supposedly natural character of woman's place in social relations. As for the source of women's oppression in capitalist society, the authors repeatedly insist that 'the basis of the whole matter is economic', but they hardly offer any exposition of what they mean. The implication is, however, that they follow Bebel in pointing to woman's economic dependence on men as the essential problem. In a future socialist society, by contrast, 'there will be equality for all, without distinction of sex', and women will therefore be independent. Equality, in the sense of equal rights, constitutes a major theme throughout *The Woman Question*. Unlike the feminists,

13. Aveling and Aveling 1972. For the pamphlet's publication-history, see Kapp 1976, pp. 82–5.

the pamphlet claims, socialists press beyond the concept of equal rights as a 'sentimental or professional' issue, for they recognise the economic basis of the woman-question and the impossibility of resolving it within capitalist society.

The Woman Question strikes a new note when it openly argues that the position of women with respect to men parallels that of men with respect to capitalists. 'Women are the creatures of an organised tyranny of men, as the workers are the creatures of an organised tyranny of idlers'. Women 'have been expropriated as to their rights as human beings, just as the labourers were expropriated as to their rights as producers'. In short, both groups have been denied their freedom. With such formulations, the authors conceptualise oppression primarily in terms of lack of political rights and the presence of hierarchical relations of authority. Moreover, the idea that women's situation parallels that of workers suggests a strategy of parallel social struggles for freedom. 'Both the oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers, must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves. [The] one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole'. Despite the pamphlet's socialist stance, its images of parallel denials of rights and parallel movements for liberation come quite close to liberal views of purely political freedoms in bourgeois society.

This explicit emphasis on the parallels between sex- and class-oppression takes a logical step beyond Engels's *Origin* and Bebel's *Woman*. In the *Origin*, the parallelism had remained latent in the series of dualities Engels had used to frame his arguments: family and society, domestic labour and public production, production of human beings and production of the means of existence, equal rights between the sexes and legal equality of the classes. In *Woman and Socialism*, Bebel often counterposed the woman-question and the social question, ambiguously according them equal weight as either separate or, paradoxically, identical questions. Moreover, in arguing that 'women should expect as little help from the men as working men do from the capitalist class', he implicitly postulated a strategy of parallel social movements.[14] The notion of a theoretical and strategic parallel between the sex- and class-struggles obviously had a certain currency within the Second International. While *The Woman Question* represented one of the first clear formulations of the position, socialist theorists and activists had evidently already adopted its substance, and it quickly became a staple of the socialist heritage.

Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* and the Avelings' *The Woman Question* may be taken as indicative of the dominant views within the Second International. To

14. Bebel 1971, p. 121.

the extent that the late-nineteenth-century socialist movement took up practical work on the issue of women's subordination, these views generally underlay the programmes and tactics that were developed. All too often, the movement offered a perspective on women's oppression that combined visionary promises of individual sexual and social liberation in the distant socialist future, on the one hand, with an understanding of equal rights as an immediate but possibly bourgeois goal, on the other. In this way, the Second International left a legacy of theory and practice on the so-called woman-question that tended to sever the struggle for equality from the tasks of revolutionary social transformation.

Chapter Eight
Toward Revolution

As the twentieth century approached, the parties of the Second International increasingly substituted a concern with immediate practical gains for a revolutionary long view. At the theoretical level this reformism, whose origins went back to the 1870s, was dubbed revisionism because it supposedly revised many of Marx's original positions. Revisionism affected every aspect of the International's theoretical outlook, but its impact on the socialist movement's approach to the so-called woman-question is hard to assess. Even in the time of Marx and Engels, socialist work on the problem of women's oppression had remained quite undeveloped, and the Second International's general underestimation of its political significance only perpetuated this state of under-development. It was not entirely obvious, therefore, what constituted the orthodox revolutionary position, nor in what manner it might be subjected to revision by reformists.

Reformism did not go unopposed within the Second International. A left wing emerged, which sought to restore the movement to a revolutionary path. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the effort deepened its participants' grasp of Marxism and of virtually all the major theoretical and practical tasks facing socialists. Because of the confused history of work on the question of women, as well as the generally weak commitment to it among socialists, the problem of women's oppression did not come under explicit scrutiny in the course of this struggle. On this issue, then, the opposition to

reformism within the socialist movement could only acquire rudimentary shape, most visibly within the German Social-Democratic Party.

The SPD had always been at the forefront of the socialist movement on the issue of woman's oppression, even though its theory and practice left much to be desired. It produced the major political text on the question, Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*. Within the Second International, it consistently took the strongest and most advanced positions for women's suffrage and against all types of discriminatory legislation. The portion of its membership that was female was the largest of any socialist party, reaching sixteen percent just before World-War I. It supported, on paper at least, women's active involvement in party-affairs, and took some steps toward developing special internal mechanisms to facilitate their participation. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, the German Social-Democratic Party could boast of a large, well-organised, and extremely militant socialist women's movement.

Many of these achievements bore witness to the dedicated work of German socialist women themselves. Moreover, on all major issues, women party-members generally took political positions well to the left of the Party as a whole. As the struggle around reformism intensified, the socialist women's movement became a stronghold of left-wing revolutionary orthodoxy.[1] While the issue of women's subordination never became a clear area of disagreement, members of the left wing put forth theoretical and practical perspectives that suggested opposition to dominant SPD positions on women.

The speeches and writings of Clara Zetkin, leader of the SPD's socialist women's movement and an early opponent of the reformism engulfing the Party, offer some of the clearest statements of this implicitly left-wing approach to the problem of women's oppression. In 1896, for instance, Zetkin delivered an address on the issue at the annual party congress, which was subsequently distributed as a pamphlet.[2] The 1896 talk was an official policy-statement of the German socialist movement. At the same time, its text suggested a theoretical position that implicitly countered the movement's drift toward reformism.

Zetkin opens the 1896 speech with a brief sketch of the origins of women's social subjugation. Morgan and other writers have shown that the development of private property engenders a contradiction within the family between

1. For discussions of the achievements and limitations of the SPD's work on women, see: Evans 1980; Evans 1977, pp. 159–65; Honeycutt 1979–80, Nolan 1977; Quataert 1979.

2. Zetkin 1957b English translation, with slight cuts, in Draper and Lipow 1976, pp. 192–201. According to Karen Honeycutt, some changes and deletions have been made in the 1957 publication of the 1896 speech, Honeycutt 1975, chapter 5, nn. 106, 129. While only a single text can be analysed here, the full range of Zetkin's theoretical and practical contributions should not be underestimated. For the period up to 1914, see Honeycutt 1975.

the man as property-owner and the woman as non-owner. On this basis arises the economic dependence of the entire female sex, and its lack of social rights. Quoting Engels to the effect that such lack of social rights constitutes 'one of the foremost and earliest forms of class rule', Zetkin nevertheless pictures the pre-capitalist family-household in conventionally idyllic terms. 'It was the capitalist mode of production that first brought about the social transformation which raised the modern woman question: it smashed to smithereens the old family economy that in pre-capitalist times had provided the great mass of women with the sustenance and meaningful content of life'.[3] To this point, Zetkin's account generally follows the lines laid down by the dominant socialist tradition. Only the remark on the specificity of the 'modern woman question' in the capitalist mode of production suggests a different perspective.

Zetkin presses further in her analysis of the theoretically specific character of the question of women. Having observed its emergence as a 'modern' question with the rise of capitalist society, she proceeds to dissect it in terms of class. 'There is a woman question for the women of the proletariat, of the middle bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, and of the Upper Ten Thousand; it takes various forms depending on the class situation of these strata'. In the following passages, which occupy half the text of the speech, Zetkin outlines these three forms of the question, in each case specifying the source of woman's oppression, the nature of the demands for equality, and the obstacles to their adoption. While in places her discussion falters, sometimes quite seriously, the very attempt to develop such a systematic analysis constituted an implicit rebuke to the vagaries of the dominant socialist position.

Zetkin begins with the ruling-class women of the 'Upper Ten Thousand'. The specific woman-question, here, involves wives' sexual and economic dependence upon men of their own class. Not work, either paid or unpaid, but property represents the core of their problem, since women of this class can employ servants to accomplish virtually all their household-tasks and spousal duties. When these women 'desire to give their lives serious content, they must first raise the demand for free and independent control over their property'. To achieve this demand, they fight against men of their own class, much as the bourgeoisie

3. Zetkin 1957b, p. 95; Draper and Lipow 1976, p. 192. Honeycutt notes that both Bebel and Liebknecht wanted Zetkin to eliminate references to the class-rule of men over women in the 1896 speech, but Zetkin argued successfully that the concept could be found in Engels's *Origin*; Draper and Lipow excise the sentence without comment or ellipsis. Honeycutt 1975, p. 193. Earlier, Zetkin had clung even more closely to Bebel's work. For example, in a speech delivered in 1889 to the founding conference of the Second International, she stressed women's economic dependence and maintained that 'in the same way that the worker is enslaved by capital, so is the woman by the man; and she will remain enslaved so long as she is not economically independent': Zetkin 1957a, p. 4; Honeycutt 1975, p. 90.

earlier had to fight against all privileged classes. In this sense, the struggle of ruling-class women for control over their own wealth after marriage constitutes 'the last stage in the emancipation of private property', and Zetkin views it as entirely consistent with bourgeois claims to liberate the individual.

The woman-question presents itself in a quite different social form among women of the small and middle bourgeoisie and the bourgeois intelligentsia. These are the intermediate strata, which undergo intensifying strain with the expansion of capitalist relations of production throughout society. As a class, the small and middle-bourgeoisie is increasingly driven to ruin, its small-scale enterprises unable to compete with capitalist industry. At the same time, capital requires an intelligent and skilled labour-force, and encourages 'overproduction in proletarian brain-workers', with the result that the bourgeois intelligentsia gradually loses its formerly secure material position and social standing. Men of the small and middle bourgeoisie and of the intelligentsia often postpone marriage, or even put it off altogether. The basis of family-life in these strata becomes ever more precarious, with a growing pool of unmarried women, and Zetkin argues that 'the women and daughters of these circles are thrust out into society to establish a life for themselves, not only one that provides bread but also one that can satisfy the spirit'. Among these women of the small and middle bourgeoisie and the bourgeois intelligentsia, a specific woman-question appears in the form of a demand for women's economic equality with men of their own class in the field of employment. Women fight for equal access to the education that will enable them to enter the liberal professions, and for the right to carry on those professions. These demands amount to nothing less than a call for capitalism to fulfil its pledge to promote free competition in every arena, this time between women and men. And, according to Zetkin, it is the fear of this competition within the liberal professions that lies behind the petty obstinacies of male resistance. The competitive battle soon drives the women of these strata to organise a women's movement and demand political rights, in order to overcome the barriers to their full economic and social participation.

In speaking of the bourgeois women's movement, Zetkin refers mainly to the organised activity of women from the small and middle bourgeoisie, and from the intelligentsia. Like women of the ruling class, these women focus on their lack of equality with men of their own class, although as earners rather than as property-owners. In both cases, there is a gap between the promise of equality offered by bourgeois society and its actual absence in daily life. While the economic aspect represents the heart of the matter, Zetkin observes that the bourgeois women's movement encompasses far more than purely economic motives. 'It also has a very much deeper intellectual and moral side. The bourgeois woman not only demands to earn her own bread, but she also wants to

live a full life intellectually and develop her own individuality'. Moreover, at all levels, 'the strivings of the bourgeois women's-rightsers are entirely justified'.[4]

Among the women of the proletariat, the woman-question assumes yet another form. Working-class women have no need to fight for entry into capitalist economic life; they are there already. 'For the proletarian woman, it is capital's need for exploitation, its unceasing search for the cheapest labor power, that has created the woman question'. Moreover, Zetkin claims, the working-class woman already enjoys both equality and economic independence, although she pays for them dearly, because of her dual obligations as worker both in the factory and in the family-household. 'Neither as a person nor as a woman or wife does she have the possibility of living a full life as an individual. For her work as wife and mother she gets only the crumbs that are dropped from the table by capitalist production'. Since capitalism has relieved her of the need to struggle for equality with the men of her own class, the working-class woman has other demands. In the immediate future, 'it is a question of erecting new barriers against the exploitation of the proletarian woman; it is a question of restoring and ensuring her rights as wife and mother'. Furthermore, 'the end-goal of her struggle is not free competition with men but bringing about the political rule of the proletariat'. Alongside the men of her own class, not in competition with them, she fights to achieve this goal. Her principal obstacle is, then, capitalism itself. At the same time, adds Zetkin, the working-class woman supports the demands of the bourgeois women's movement, 'but she regards the realization of these demands only as a means to an end, so that she can get into the battle along with the workingmen and equally armed'.

Obviously, a great deal of what Zetkin has to say about the three forms of the woman-question departs from the realities of capitalist society. To some extent, these inaccuracies owe their existence to her failure to distinguish, within the 1896 speech, theoretical argument from empirical description, a confusion shared by most socialist writers of her day. Beyond this problem, however, Zetkin's contribution remains limited by certain theoretical weaknesses. That is, the distortions in Zetkin's consideration of the woman-question appear to be largely empirical, but they have theoretical roots as well as serious political ramifications.

In the first place, along with virtually all her contemporaries, not to mention Marx and Engels, Zetkin glosses over the issue of domestic labour within the family-household. She severely underestimates the contradictions that arise from the sex-division of this labour in all three classes. In this way, she loses an important opportunity to strengthen her argument for the existence of

4. The term 'women's rightsers' is as awkward in German as it is in English, and was employed polemically within the socialist movement. See Draper and Lipow 1976, p. 180.

specific forms of the woman-question according to class. Empirically, the ruling-class wife's mediated relationship to housework bears little resemblance to the working-class woman's never-ending domestic drudgery. And at the theoretical level, the distinction stands out even more sharply, for only the unpaid domestic labour in the working-class household contributes to the reproduction of the labour-power required for capitalist production.

Second, Zetkin's picture of the working-class woman constitutes an abstraction that verges on caricature. While the ability to command a wage always entails a certain level of independence, in no way could it be asserted as a fact that 'the wife of the proletarian, in consequence, achieved her economic independence'. In 1896, no less than now, working-class women suffered grievously from their lack of equality with men of their own class at the work-place, in every possible way: pay, working conditions, access to jobs, opportunity for promotion, and so forth. Furthermore, working-class women lacked equality in the civil sphere and were oppressed as women within the working-class family. Elsewhere in the text Zetkin even cites several examples of the harmful effects of these phenomena, not only for women but for the working-class movement. By not confronting such facts theoretically, Zetkin simplifies her analysis but thereby passes over the problem of specifying the relationship between the fight for women's equality and the struggle against capitalism. Moreover, along with most socialist theorists of her period, she fails to distinguish women-workers from working-class women; that is, in speaking of the proletarian woman, she always assumes that the woman participates in wage work. In this way, household-members who do not engage in wage work – for example, wives, young children, the elderly, the sick – become analytically, and therefore politically, invisible. At the root of these confusions, which haunt socialist work to this day, lies the theoretical invisibility of the unpaid labour required to reproduce labour-power in the working-class household.

Finally, Zetkin errs in arguing that specific woman-questions arise only within those classes thrust forward by the capitalist mode of production. In a period in which peasants still made up the majority of the European oppressed masses, she, along with many other socialists, idealised the peasantry as representing a 'natural economy', however 'shrunken and tattered' under the impact of emergent capitalism. In general, the parties of the Second International tended to ignore the difficult theoretical and strategic problems presented by the existence of this massive peasantry alongside a growing industrial proletariat, and Zetkin, despite her political acuity, all too easily fell into line. Peasantwomen, she claimed, 'found a meaningful content of life in productive work . . . their lack of social rights did not impinge on their consciousness', and therefore, 'we find no woman question arising in the ranks of the peasantry'. Here, the reality of

any peasant-society, past or present, strenuously contradicts Zetkin's remarks. Among European peasants at the end of the nineteenth century, the woman-question had its own, quite specific, character, which required analysis by the socialist movement. Peasants could not, any more than women, be excluded from a revolutionary perspective.

Having clarified, to the best of her ability, the theoretical issues involved in the problem of women's oppression, Zetkin devotes the rest of the 1896 speech to the current situation of the women's movement in Germany and the practical tasks to be taken up by the party. In the long run, the goal of the bourgeois women's movement – equality with men of one's own class – hardly threatens capitalist relations of power; hence 'bourgeois society does not take a stance of basic opposition to the demands of the bourgeois women's movement'. In Germany, however, a prejudiced and short-sighted bourgeoisie fears any reform whatsoever, not understanding that if the reforms were granted, nothing would change. 'The proletarian woman would go into the camp of the proletariat, the bourgeois woman into the camp of the bourgeoisie'. Zetkin also cautions against 'socialistic outcroppings in the bourgeois women's movement, which turn up only so long as the bourgeois women feel themselves to be oppressed'. In this context, the responsibility falls on the German Social-Democratic Party to make good its commitment to strengthening the socialist women's movement.

Zetkin proposes certain general guidelines for socialist work among women. The party's main task is to arouse the working-class woman's class-consciousness and engage her in the class-struggle. Hence, 'we have no special women's agitation to carry on but rather socialist agitation among women'. Zetkin warns against the tendency to focus on 'women's petty interests of the moment', and emphasises the importance, as well as the difficulty, of organising women workers into trade-unions. She notes that several major obstacles, specific to women as women, stand in the way of successfully undertaking socialist work among working-class women. Women often work in occupations that leave them isolated and hard to mobilise. Young women believe that their wage-work is temporary, while married women suffer the burden of the double shift. Finally, special laws in Germany deny women the right to political assembly and association, and working-class women therefore cannot organise together with men. Zetkin emphasises that special forms of work must be devised in order to carry out socialist work among women.

For example, a proposal that the Party appoint field-organisers whose task would be to encourage working-class women to participate in trade-unions and support the socialist movement receives Zetkin's backing. The idea had already been endorsed at the 1894 Congress, and Zetkin's comments actually represent an insistence that the Party follow through on its commitment. If developed

systematically, consistently, and on a large scale, she argues, the network of field-organisers would draw many working-class women into the socialist movement.

Family-obligations make it impossible for many women to come to meetings, and Zetkin therefore underscores the critical role of printed material. She suggests the Party produce a series of pamphlets 'that would bring women nearer to socialism in their capacity as workers, wives and mothers'. She criticises the Party's daily press for not taking a more political approach in articles designed to speak to its female readership. And she proposes that the Party undertake the systematic distribution of agitational leaflets to women: 'Not the traditional leaflets which cram the whole socialist programme onto one side of a sheet together with all the erudition of the age – no, small leaflets that bring up a single practical question with a single angle, from the standpoint of the class struggle'. Furthermore, these leaflets must be attractively printed, on decent paper and in large print. As good examples of agitational material for women, Zetkin cites contemporary United States and British temperance-literature.[5]

Behind these comments lies more than a criticism of the Party's work among women. Zetkin clearly makes a general indictment of the officialdom's bureaucratic and passive approach to socialist agitation and propaganda. Unlike the reformists, she insists that the party take 'the standpoint of the class struggle: this is the main thing'. When the Party reaches out to women, it must treat them as political beings. In the short as well as the long run, the socialist revolution needs women's creative participation at least as much as working-class women need full liberation. Work among women 'is difficult, it is laborious, it demands great devotion and great sacrifice, but this sacrifice will be rewarded and must be made. For, just as the proletariat can achieve its emancipation only if it fights together without distinction of nationality or distinction of occupation, so also it can achieve its emancipation only if it holds together without distinction of sex'. Most important, she concludes, 'the involvement of the great mass of proletarian women in the emancipatory struggle of the proletariat is one of the pre-conditions for the victory of the socialist idea, for the construction of a socialist society'.

In sum, Zetkin's 1896 speech made an important theoretical and political contribution to the socialist movement's understanding of the problem of women's subordination. Significantly, the speech rarely mentions love, sexuality, interpersonal relations, or human feelings, subjects that represented the core of the so-called woman-question for most nineteenth-century socialists. Instead, Zetkin

5. For these recommendations, see Zetkin 1957b, p. 109; the details are omitted in the translation by Draper and Lipow 1976.

focuses on the theoretical issues and practical tasks that confront the socialist movement. Only her comments on the working-class household sometimes depart from this businesslike and unromantic stance, even idealising working women as nurturant wives and mothers of the fighting – male – proletariat. Similarly, her sketch of the socialist future recalls Bebel's work in its depiction of the family as an isolated entity as well as its emphasis on woman's independence. 'When the family disappears as an economic unit and its place is taken by the family as a moral unit, women will develop their individuality as comrades advancing on a par with men with equal rights, an equal role in production and equal aspirations, while at the same time they are able to fulfil their functions as wife and mother to the highest degree'. From a theoretical standpoint, such remarks retreat from the position put forth in the body of the speech. Politically, they suggest an almost ritual concession to the ambiguity of the socialist tradition, probably necessary to guarantee the speech's acceptance by party-delegates.

The major portion of Zetkin's text attempted to build a theoretical foundation for revolutionary strategy. More explicitly than any socialist thinker before her, she assessed the particular theoretical character of the problem of women's subordination in class-society. Her discussion of the specific forms taken by the so-called woman-question in terms of different modes of production, and the various classes within them, remains, despite its problems, important. Indeed, its weaknesses, which can be traced to inadequacies shared by the socialist movement as a whole, actually delineate a new set of theoretical tasks. To the extent that Zetkin worked out her analysis within the framework of Marx's theory of social reproduction, she generally avoided the theoretical quagmires – utopianism, economic determinism, and the like – into which both Engels and Bebel had fallen. In this sense, the thrust of Zetkin's remarks placed her in opposition to the reformist tendency to revise Marxist theory, however undeveloped that theory had remained on the issue of women's oppression.

Consistent with her vigorous opposition to reformism spreading throughout the socialist movement, Zetkin's strategic orientation in the 1896 speech pushed well beyond two obstacles hindering socialist work among women. First, she questioned the Second International's tendency to identify the woman-question with the general social question, even if she did not adequately specify their actual relationship. In this way, she attempted to force the socialist movement to confront the practical problems flowing from its professed commitments. And second, she insisted that women's active participation is central to the socialist revolution, and therefore refused to postpone serious socialist work with women. In later years, with the hindsight afforded by several more decades of experience, Zetkin reached the conclusion that the Second International had actually been

wholly incapable of providing a sound theoretical or organisational foundation for such work. Beset with reformism and 'the most trivial philistine prejudices against the emancipation of women', the socialist movement had taken 'no initiative in the theoretical clarification of the problems or practical carrying out of the work'. In this atmosphere, Zetkin commented, 'the progress achieved was essentially the work of women themselves'.[6]

The eruption of World-War I in 1914 forced the tension within the socialist movement between reformism and a more revolutionary outlook to breaking point. Most parties in the Second International supported the war, taking whichever side their national bourgeoisie happened to stand on. Working-class internationalism seemed to vanish into thin air, as a narrow patriotism swept through socialist ranks. Meanwhile, individual left-wing socialists recognised they had lost the battle against reformism, and began to re-group. They opposed the war, either assuming an essentially pacifist stance or, more militantly, viewing it as an opportunity for revolutionary action. As hostilities dragged on, popular discontent replaced the initial patriotic euphoria, and important sectors of the population turned to those who sought to end the war. In consequence, the pacifist and revolutionary minorities in every socialist party grew stronger. Their anti-war perspective seemed vindicated when the Bolshevik Party came to power in Russia in 1917.

The Bolshevik Revolution transformed not only Russia but the international socialist movement. For the first time, revolutionaries had fought for and won the opportunity to begin the transition to a communist society, and the effort commanded the attention of socialists everywhere. The seizure of state-power was only the first step, and weighty problems confronted the new society. Externally, the forces of capitalism tried, in every possible way, including military intervention, to undermine the revolution's success. And internally, the task of building a socialist society quickly proved tremendously difficult. Every question that had formerly concerned the international socialist movement now became a matter of the utmost urgency, to be resolved in concrete detail, in both theory and practice. Among these tasks loomed the problem of women's subordination, made all the more pressing because of several peculiarities of the Russian Revolution. First, the majority of Russia's population consisted of peasants, half of whom lived the particularly hard life of peasant-women – often working in the fields as well as the household, and brutally oppressed by feudal traditions of male supremacy. Second, women wage-earners constituted a relatively new and fast-growing group, especially in the very small Russian industrial sector, where

6. Zetkin 1929, pp. 373, 375, 376. I would like to thank Charlotte Todes Stern of New York City for bringing this article to my attention.

their numbers rose to include forty percent of the industrial workforce during the war. Last, radical movements in Russia had traditionally attracted a large number of women-activists, who often played leading roles, and the Bolshevik party was no exception. Objectively, and from the start, the question of women represented a critical issue for the future of socialism in Russia.

The history of women's situation in the Soviet Union has yet to be fully analysed. Most accounts sketch a gloomy picture in which numerous obstacles conspire to block full liberation for women: insufficient material resources, erroneous or opportunist political priorities, wholesale ideological backwardness, a low level of theoretical attention. Although correct in its general outlines, the picture remains blurred. In particular, despite a great deal of research, it fails to situate the history of the question of women within an adequate understanding of the development of the Russian Revolution, and of the international socialist and communist movements.[7] Moreover, the problem of the nature and source of the theoretical framework underpinning Soviet work on the issue of women's subordination has barely been addressed.

The rudiments of that theoretical framework were established by V. I. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party and a prolific writer on questions of socialist theory and practice. Lenin's comments on women make up only a tiny portion of his work, and it is not clear to what extent they were taken up within the Bolshevik Party or implemented in practice. Nonetheless, they are important for their insight into the theoretical heart of the problem of women's oppression.

Like Zetkin, Lenin took a left-wing position in the struggle against reformism. In the Russian context, however, this struggle acquired its own form, quite distinct from the public battle fought within the massive and powerful German party. Under the Tsars, Marxism remained an illegal movement in a backward country. Neither a strong trade-union movement nor a socialist party affiliated with the Second International could be built. The major theoretical task for Russian socialists at the end of the nineteenth century was to assimilate Marxist theory in order to put it into practice in their own country, where conditions differed sharply from the industrialising nations of Western Europe and North America. Opposition to revisionism among Russian socialists therefore initially took the particular shape of an effort to grasp and defend Marxism itself.

Two tendencies within Russian radicalism stood in the way of the developing Marxist movement. First, the Russian populists, or *Narodniks*, argued that the peasantry constituted the backbone of the revolutionary process, that Russia would be able to bypass the stage of industrial capitalism, and that the peasant-commune provided the germ of a future communist society. Second, a group

7. Important recent studies on women in Russia include: Bobroff 1974; Clements 1982–3. Glickman 1977; Hayden 1976; Heitlinger 1979; Lapidus 1977; Massell 1972; Stites 1978.

known as the 'legal Marxists', so named because they wrote in a form capable of passing Russian censorship, embraced Marxism largely because it recognised the historically progressive character 1 of capitalism. In opposition to the *Narodniks*, the legal Marxists welcomed capitalism as a necessary first stage on the way to socialism; as might be expected, many of them later lost their interest in revolution and became staunch bourgeois liberals.

A central theme in Lenin's earliest writings was the defence of Marxism against attacks from the *Narodniks*, on the one hand, and distortions by the legal Marxists, on the other. At the same time, he began to elaborate a Marxist analysis of the development of capitalism in Russia and of the prospects for a socialist revolution. When Russian Marxists founded the Social-Democratic Workers' Party, after the turn of the century, bourgeois liberalism became yet another target of his polemics.

Lenin's first comments touching on the problem of women's oppression appear in his 1894 critique of the *Narodnik* writer Nikolay Mikhailovsky, who had caricatured Marxist theory. The issue of women's situation arises because Mikhailovsky mocks Engels's discussion of '"the production of man himself", i.e. procreation', in the preface to the *Origin*, castigating it as a peculiar form of 'economic materialism'. He suggests instead that 'not only legal, but also economic relations themselves constitute a "superstructure" on sexual and family relations'. In reply, Lenin ridicules Mikhailovsky's argument that 'procreation is not an economic factor', and asks sarcastically, 'Where have you read in the works of Marx or Engels that they necessarily spoke of economic materialism? When they described their world outlook they called it simply materialism. Their basic idea . . . was that social relations are divided into material and ideological . . . Mr. Mikhailovsky surely does not think that procreation relations are ideological?' The way Lenin defends Engels's statements in the preface, however questionable their theoretical status may be, is significant. He puts the major emphasis on the point that Marxism is not economic determinism. And he insists on the material core embedded in all social relations, even those involving women, the family, and sexuality.[8] This perspective, which relies far more on Marx than on later socialist theorists, became the foundation of Lenin's approach to the problem of women's subordination.

Capitalism developed in Russia on the basis of a savagely patriarchal feudal culture. In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, published in 1899, Lenin examined the impact of capitalist social relations on peasant-life. Because of its highly socialised labour-processes, capitalism 'absolutely refuses to tolerate survivals of patriarchalism and personal dependence' over the long run. Lenin

8. Lenin 1960–1970a, pp. 148–52. For an analysis of the preface to Engels's *Origin*, see Chapter 6.

argues that in this sense 'the drawing of women and juveniles into production is, at bottom, progressive', despite the particularly oppressive conditions these sectors often encounter under the rule of capital. In sum: 'By destroying the patriarchal isolation of these categories of the population who formerly never emerged from the narrow circle of domestic, family relationships, by drawing them into direct participation in social production, large-scale machine industry stimulates their development and increases their independence, in other words, creates conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of pre-capitalist relations'. Lenin points out that any attempts 'to ban the work of women and juveniles in industry, or to maintain the patriarchal manner of life that ruled out such work, would be reactionary and utopian'.[9] With these remarks, Lenin has simply used Marxist theory to develop an analysis of the significance in Russia of women's and children's participation in social labour. Obvious though this approach may seem, at the time it represented a rare return to the best of Marx and Engels.

In these early decades of the Russian socialist movement, Lenin also addressed several specific problems having to do with the special oppression of women as women. He condemned prostitution, locating it in social conditions and incidentally taking swipes at liberal attempts to end it. He analysed the class-character of the birth-control movement, contrasting the psychology of the petit-bourgeois liberal to that of the class-conscious worker. At the same time he underscored the need for socialists to support the abolition of all laws limiting availability of abortion or contraception. 'Freedom for medical propaganda and the protection of the elementary democratic rights of citizens, men and women, are one thing. The social theory of neomalthusianism is quite another'. Most important, Lenin repeatedly denounced the peasantry's 'century-old traditions of patriarchal life', and their particularly brutal implications for women.[10]

In subsequent years, Lenin began to pay special attention to the relationship between sex-oppression and class-cleavages. While he had always supported equality between women and men, in the traditional socialist manner, he now came up against the more difficult problem of specifying the nature of that equality. Initially, the problem appeared in the context of discussions on the so-called national question. Among socialists, questions of the equality of nations and the rights of national minorities became matters of heated debate in the

9. Lenin 1974, p. 552.

10. Lenin 1966, p. 30; Lenin 1974, p. 546. On abortion, see also Lenin 1966, pp. 28–9. On the peasantry, see also Lenin 1966, pp. 33–5, 60, and the section entitled 'Socialism' in Lenin's article 'Karl Marx', Lenin 1960–70b, pp. 71–4. On prostitution, see Lenin 1966, pp. 26, 31–2. The relatively high number of articles published in 1913 undoubtedly had to do with the revival of a Russian socialist women's movement in 1912–4, and the first celebration of International Women's Day in Russia in 1913; see Stites 1978, pp. 253–8.

early twentieth century, as nationalist feelings and political conflict intensified around the world. At the root of these developments lay the emergence of imperialism, with its chain of oppressed and oppressor-nations. Hence, it was imperialism that forced Lenin to examine the nature of equality in bourgeois society, and to delineate the role of the struggle for democratic rights in the context of a revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism.

The peculiar character of the question of democratic rights owes its existence, according to Lenin, to the fact that in capitalist society, political phenomena have a certain autonomy with respect to economic phenomena. Numerous economic evils are part of capitalism as such, so that 'it is *impossible* to eliminate them economically without eliminating capitalism itself'. By contrast, departures from democracy constitute political evils, and in principle can be resolved within the framework of capitalist society. Lenin cites the example of divorce, an example first used by Rosa Luxemburg in a discussion of the national question and the right to uphold national autonomy. It is perfectly possible, if rare, argues Lenin, for a capitalist state to enact laws granting the right to full freedom of divorce. Nonetheless, 'in most cases the right of divorce will remain unrealizable under capitalism, for the oppressed sex is subjugated economically. No matter how much democracy there is under capitalism, the woman remains a "domestic slave", a slave locked up in the bedroom, nursery, kitchen . . . The right of divorce, as *all* other democratic rights without exception, is conditional, restricted, formal, narrow and extremely difficult of realization'. In sum, 'capitalism combines formal equality with economic and, consequently, social inequality'.[11]

If equality is so difficult to realise in capitalist society, why should socialists enter the fight to defend and extend democratic rights? Why devote energy to a seemingly useless battle on bourgeois terrain? First, because each victory represents an advance in itself, however limited, in that it provides somewhat better conditions of life for the entire population. And second, because the struggle for democratic rights enhances the ability of all to identify their enemy. As Lenin put it:

> Marxists know that democracy does *not* abolish class oppression. It only makes the class struggle more direct, wider, more open and pronounced, and that is what we need. The fuller the freedom of divorce, the clearer will women see that the source of their 'domestic slavery' is capitalism, not lack of rights. The more democratic the system of government, the clearer will the workers see that the root evil is capitalism, not lack of rights. The fuller national equality

11. Lenin 1966, pp. 42–4, 80.

> (and it is *not* complete without freedom of secession), the clearer will the workers of the oppressed nations see that the cause of their oppression is capitalism, not lack of rights, etc.[12]

In this sense, the battle for democratic rights is a means for establishing and maintaining the best framework within which to carry out the class-struggle.

Lenin's work on democratic rights went well beyond earlier socialist analyses of the nature of equality. At the theoretical level, it offered serious insights into the mystery of the relationship among sex-, class-, and national oppression in capitalist societies. And practically, it constituted an important element in the development of revolutionary strategy with respect to national minorities, oppressed nations, and women. Here, twin dangers haunted the socialist movement. On the one hand, some denied the critical significance of these special oppressions, and refused to take them up seriously in practice, and often in theory as well. On the other, many developed reformist positions that scarcely differed, at the practical level, from bourgeois nationalism or liberal feminism. Armed with an understanding of the character of democratic rights, a socialist movement had a better chance to confront national and women's oppression without slipping into either error.

Once the bourgeois state has been overthrown in a socialist revolution, as happened in Russia in 1917, full political equality comes immediately onto the agenda. The new Soviet government began to enact legislation granting formal equality to women in many areas. Yet precisely because formal equality remains distinct from real social equality, even in the socialist transition, legislation could not be enough. Indeed, observes Lenin, 'the more *thoroughly* we clear the ground of the lumber of the old, bourgeois laws and institutions, the more we realize that we have only cleared the ground to build on, but are not yet building'. In the case of women, he identifies as the major barrier to further progress the material phenomenon of unpaid labour within the family-household. Writing in 1919, for instance, he points out that despite 'all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a *domestic slave*, because *petty housework* crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery'.[13]

From the start, Lenin always put more weight on the problem of women's material oppression within the individual family-household than on their lack of rights, their exclusion from equal social participation, or their dependence upon men. Speaking of peasant- and proletarian women, and sometimes of

12. Lenin 1966, p. 43.
13. Lenin 1966, pp. 63–4.

petit-bourgeois women as well, he repeatedly drew a picture of domestic slavery, household-bondage, humiliating subjugation by the savage demands of kitchen and nursery drudgery, and the like.[14] This emphasis was unique in the Marxist literature, and probably originated in Lenin's focus on the peasantry, with its traditions of patriarchal relations, as a critical element in the revolutionary struggle. Whatever its source, Lenin's concern with the problem of domestic labour enabled him to formulate the questions of women's oppression and of the conditions for women's liberation with a clarity not previously achieved.

Lenin argues that the special oppression of women in capitalist society has a double root. In the first place, like national minorities, women suffer as a group from political inequality. And in the second, women are imprisoned in what Lenin terms domestic slavery – that is, they perform, under oppressive conditions, the unpaid labour in the household required to maintain and renew the producing classes: 'The female half of the human race is doubly oppressed under capitalism. The working woman and the peasant woman are oppressed by capital, but over and above that, even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics, they remain, firstly, deprived of some rights because the law does not give them equality with men; and secondly – and this is the main thing – they remain in "household bondage", they continue to be "household slaves", for they are overburdened with the drudgery of the most squalid and backbreaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the individual family household'. In this passage, Lenin makes it evident that he considers the second factor – domestic slavery – to be 'the main thing'.[15]

Just as the source of women's oppression as women is twofold, so the basic conditions for their full liberation are also twofold. Obviously, the lack of equal rights must be remedied, but this political obligation is only the first, and easiest, step because 'even when women have full rights, they still remain downtrodden because all housework is left to them'.[16] Lenin recognises that developing the material conditions for ending women's historic household-bondage constitutes a far more difficult task. He mentions the need 'for women to participate in common productive labor' and in public life on a basis of equality, but he puts major emphasis on efforts to transform petty housekeeping into a series of large-scale socialised services: community-kitchens, public dining rooms, laundries, repair shops, nurseries, kindergartens, and so forth.[17] Finally, in addition to the political and material conditions for women's liberation, Lenin points to the critical

14. Lenin 1966, pp. 25, 26, 43, 60, 63–4.
15. Lenin 1966, pp. 83–4.
16. Lenin 1966, p. 69; see also pp. 59–60, 63, 66–8, 80–1, 84, 88, 116.
17. On women in social production, see Lenin 1966, p. 69; see also pp. 64, 81. On socialised services, see Lenin 1966, pp. 64, 69–70, 84, 115–16.

role of ideological struggle in remoulding 'the most deep-rooted, inveterate, hidebound and rigid' mentalities inherited from the old order.[18]

To implement its policies with respect to women, the new Soviet government faced the task of developing appropriate methods of work on several fronts. It was easy enough to pass legislation removing women's legal inequality, but to persuade people to live with it was quite another matter. Lenin addressed this issue in a speech to the hastily organised First All-Russia Congress of Working Women, held in Moscow in November 1918, where his appearance caused a sensation and seemed to offer tangible evidence of Bolshevik support for the undertaking of special work among peasant- and proletarian women. Using the new marriage-law as his example, Lenin stresses the importance of careful propaganda and education, for 'by lending too sharp an edge to the struggle we may only arouse popular resentment; such methods of struggle tend to perpetuate the division of the people along religious lines, whereas our strength lies in unity'. Similarly, the drawing of women into the labour-force and the initiation of measures to begin to socialise housework and child-care required the utmost sensitivity to existing conditions. Here, Lenin argues that 'the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves', for it is they who will develop the new institutions. At the same time, the Party had the obligation to provide guidance and devote resources to their work, and in 1919 Lenin already found its commitment wanting. 'Do we in practice pay sufficient attention to this question', he asks, 'which in theory every Communist considers indisputable? Of course not. Do we take proper care of the *shoots* of communism which already exist in this sphere? Again the answer is *no* . . . We *do not nurse* these shoots of the new as we should'.[19]

Women's participation in political life constituted an area of serious concern, for 'you cannot draw the masses into politics without drawing the women into politics as well'. Here again, Lenin regarded the timid efforts of both the international socialist movement and his own Bolshevik party as insufficient. Two major obstacles hampered the work. In the first place, many socialists feared that any attempt to do special work among women inevitably smacked of bourgeois feminism or revisionism, and therefore attacked all such activities. For this position, Lenin had nothing but scorn. While arguing that within the Party itself, a separate organisation of women would be factional, he insisted the realities of women's situation meant that 'we must have our own groups to work among [women], special methods of agitation, and special forms of organization'. Even more serious was the lack of enthusiasm among socialists when it came to

18. Lenin 1966, p. 84.

19. Lenin 1966, pp. 60, 70, 64. On the 1918 Congress, see the account in Stites 1978, pp. 329–31. For an overview of the obstacles faced by the Bolsheviks, see Clements 1982–3.

providing practical support for the special work among women. In a conversation recorded by Zetkin, Lenin criticised the general passivity and backwardness of male comrades on this issue. 'They regard agitation and propaganda among women and the task of rousing and revolutionizing them as of secondary importance, as the job of just the women Communists . . . Unfortunately, we may still say of many of our comrades, "scratch the Communist and a philistine appears"'. Behind this view lies contempt for women. 'In the final analysis, it is an underestimation of women and of their accomplishments'. As evidence of the seriousness of the problem, Lenin describes how party-men complacently watch their own wives take on the burdens and worries of the household, never thinking to lend a hand. Lenin concludes that special work must be done on these questions among men. 'Our communist work among the masses of women, and our political work in general, involves considerable educational work among the men. We must root out the old slave-owner's point of view, both in the Party and among the masses'. According to Zetkin's notes, Lenin went so far as to weight this task equally with that of forming a staff and organisations to work among women.[20]

Lenin's remarks about male chauvinism never acquired programmatic form, and the campaign against male ideological backwardness remained at most a minor theme in Bolshevik practice. Nonetheless, his observations on the problem represented an extremely rare acknowledgment of its seriousness. As for the development of special work among women, numerous socialists, almost all of them women, took it up as best they could.

On the issues of love and sexuality, Lenin, like Zetkin, said very little, and nothing that was meant for official publication. In a correspondence with Inessa Armand in 1915, he criticises her notion of free love for its lack of clarity. While agreeing that love must be free from economic, social, and patriarchal restrictions, he cautions against a 'bourgeois interpretation' that wishes to free love from interpersonal responsibility.[21] Later, in the conversation recorded by Zetkin, Lenin directs a lengthy tirade against those who give too much attention to 'sex and marriage problems'. He criticises German socialist organisers who dwell on the subject in discussions with women-workers. And he worries about attempts in the Soviet Union to transform the nihilist tradition of sexual radicalism into a socialist framework:

> Many people call it 'revolutionary' and 'communist'. They sincerely believe that this is so. I am an old man, and I do not like it. I may be a morose ascetic, but quite often this so-called 'new sex life' of young people – and frequently

20. Lenin 1966, pp. 83, 114–15. It must be remembered that virtually no socialist in this period seriously challenged the sex-division of domestic labour, not even Alexandra Kollontai; see Heinen 1978.

21. Lenin 1966, pp. 36–41.

> of the adults too – seems to me purely bourgeois and simply an extension of the good old bourgeois brothel. All this has nothing in common with free love as we Communists understand it.

For Lenin and much of the socialist tradition, it was individual sex-love in socialist society that was destined to transcend the hypocritical two-sided sexual life of capitalist societies, abolishing repressive marriages on the one hand, and prostitution on the other. Individual sex-love was the socialist answer to 'the decay, putrescence, and filth of bourgeois marriage with its difficult dissolution, its licence for the husband and bondage for the wife, and its disgustingly false sex morality'. Anything else smacked of promiscuity, and 'promiscuity in sexual matters is bourgeois. It is a sign of degeneration'.[22] Lenin's formulations, as remembered by Zetkin and published after his death, functioned mainly as a rationale for sexual conservatism among socialists.

In the long run, the experience of the Russian Revolution raised at least as many questions about the relation of women's liberation to socialist transformation as it answered. Zetkin might have observed that here, too, history had posed a specific woman-question, distinct from those thrust forward by capitalist relations of production: the question of women in the era of the transition to communism.

Given the generally undeveloped state of socialist work on the problem of women's oppression, Zetkin's and Lenin's theoretical contributions failed to make a lasting impression. With some exceptions, twentieth-century socialists and communists have adopted positions very similar to those dominant within the Second International. Yet the legacy is both incomplete and ambiguous.

22. Lenin 1966, pp. 101, 105–7. On nihilist sexual radicalism, and on the issue of sexuality in the Russian socialist movement, see Stites 1978, pp. 89–99, 258–69, 346–91.

Part Four
From the Woman-Question to Women's Liberation

Chapter Nine
A Dual Legacy

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Marxist tradition provides only limited theoretical guidance on the twin problems of women's oppression and women's liberation. Marked by omissions and inconsistencies, the classical literature fails to confront the issues in a systematic manner. Much of it rests, furthermore, on an inadequate grasp of Marx's theory of social development. Despite a general commitment to Marxism, commentaries tend also to vacillate among several different critiques of bourgeois society, notably, utopian socialism, crude materialism, and liberal feminism. In short, no stable Marxist theoretical framework has been established for the consideration of the question of women by socialists.

Given the disorderly state of this theoretical work, it is not surprising that certain patterns have gone unnoticed. As it turns out, two essentially contradictory approaches to the problem of women's subordination have always co-existed within the socialist tradition, although the distinction has not been explicitly recognised, nor the positions clearly differentiated from one another. An unspoken debate between two alternatives has therefore haunted efforts to address a variety of major theoretical and practical questions concerning women's oppression and liberation. The origins of this hidden debate go back to the works of Marx and Engels themselves, and it has taken concrete shape in the ambiguous theory and practice of later socialist and communist movements. The implicit controversy

has recently re-appeared, transformed in significant ways, within the contemporary women's movement.

Tangled within the socialist literature, then, lie two distinct views of women's situation, corresponding to divergent theoretical positions. For convenience, the two positions may be labelled according to their starting point for the analysis of women's oppression. On the one hand is the 'dual-systems perspective': women's oppression derives from their situation within an autonomous system of sex-divisions of labour and male supremacy. On the other is the 'social reproduction perspective': women's oppression has its roots in women's differential location within social reproduction as a whole.[1] The following brief characterisation of the two perspectives aims simply to suggest the theoretical underpinning and analytical consequences of each position. The social-reproduction perspective is explored in more depth in the next chapters.

In essence, the dual-systems perspective takes off from what appears to be obvious: divisions of labour and authority according to sex, the oppression of women, and the family. These phenomena are treated more or less as givens, analytically separable, at least in part, from the social relations in which they are embedded. The major analytical task is to examine the origin and development of the empirical correlation between sex-divisions of labour and the social oppression of women. In general, it is women's involvement in the sex-division of labour, and their direct relationship – of dependence and of struggle – to men, rather than their insertion in overall social reproduction, that establishes their oppression. At the same time, women's oppression and the sex-division of labour are seen to be tied to the mode of production dominant in a given society, and to vary according to class. These latter factors enter the investigation as important variables which are, however, essentially external to the workings of women's oppression.

Class- and sex-oppression therefore appear to be autonomous phenomena from the dual-systems perspective. Despite its assertions of an 'inextricable relationship' between sex and class, this perspective leaves the character of that relationship unspecified. Logically speaking, however, the dual-systems perspective implies that women's oppression follows a course that is essentially independent from that of class-oppression. And it suggests, furthermore, that some systematic mechanism, peculiar to the sex-division of labour and distinct from the class-struggle characterising a given mode of production, constitutes the main force

1. This terminology revises that used in Vogel 1979, which opposed the 'family argument' to the 'social production argument'. The term dual-systems perspective is adopted from Young 1980. I am grateful to Nancy Holmstrom for a discussion that clarified both the terminology and the analysis in this chapter. For an interesting parallel, see the discussion of two positions on the so-called national question in Blaut 1982.

behind women's oppression. In other words, according to the theory implicit in the dual-systems perspective, two powerful motors drive the development of history: the class-struggle and the sex-struggle.

While the dual-systems perspective begins with empirically given phenomena whose correlations are interpreted by means of a chain of plausible inferences, the social-reproduction perspective starts out from a theoretical position – namely, that class-struggle over the conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterised by exploitation. In these societies, surplus-labour is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the constant presence and renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labour-process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women's capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class-society.

From the point of view of social reproduction, women's oppression in class-societies is rooted in their differential position with respect to generational replacement-processes. Families constitute the historically specific social form through which generational replacement usually takes place. In class societies, 'one cannot speak at all of the family "*as such*"', as Marx once put it, for families have widely varying places within the social structure.[2] In propertied classes, families usually act as the carrier and transmitter of property, although they may also have other roles. Here, women's oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property. In subordinate classes, families usually structure the site at which direct producers are maintained and reproduced; such families may also participate directly in immediate production. Female oppression in these classes derives from women's involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production. While women's oppression in class-societies is experienced at many levels, it rests, ultimately, on these material foundations. The specific working out of this oppression is a subject for historical, not theoretical, investigation.

Presented in crystallised form, the distinction between the dual systems- and the social-reproduction perspectives is relatively clear. Of the two, the social-reproduction perspective accords most closely with Marx's analysis of the workings of the capitalist mode of production, particularly as elaborated in *Capital*. The demarcation between the two perspectives has always been blurred, however, even while the presence of contradictory positions underlies much of the ambiguity marking the theoretical work produced by the socialist movement. The dual-systems perspective has generally prevailed over the social-reproduction

2. Marx and Engels 1975a, p. 180.

perspective, despite periodic efforts to derive an analysis of the question of women from Marx's work.

Engels's *Origin*, for example, relies heavily on the dual-systems perspective. In the first place, the perspective is built into the very organisation of the book. By assigning a separate chapter to the family, Engels implicitly suggests that the category of family – whose general shaping by the sex-division of labour he takes as a given – can be considered virtually autonomously. Moreover, he regards the sex-division of labour as biologically based and historically inflexible, whereas all other major phenomena in the *Origin* have a social foundation. In this way, Engels awards a central role to the sex-division of labour in the family, but places it in a theoretical limbo. Similarly, women's oppression seems to spring from the independent nature of the sex-division of labour itself. The remarks in the preface concerning the twofold character of production make these dualities explicit. The dual-systems perspective takes the general form, in the *Origin*, of an emphasis on the sex-division of labour and on the family as critically important phenomena which are not, however, firmly located with respect to overall social reproduction.

The *Origin*'s characterisation of the single family as the 'economic unit of society', with the additional implication that 'modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as molecules', further illustrates its implicit dependence on the dual-systems perspective. In such statements, Engels retains the separation of family from social reproduction, but peculiarly assigns a dominant-constitutive role to the former. The manner in which the family-unit functions within social reproduction, other than, in the case of the ruling class, to hold property, is never clearly defined. Along the same lines, Marx, as well as Engels, spoke several times of the sex-division of labour in the family as a sort of representative miniature of the social division of labour in society. 'The modern family contains in germ not only slavery (*servitus*) but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains *in miniature* all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state'. Engels also uses the image to describe relations between the sexes. 'Within the family, [the husband] is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat'. Since neither Marx nor Engels ever specifies, in any precise manner, the nature of this 'representation' – that is, the relationship between the family 'germ' and the social whole – these images function as simplistic parallels. At best, they are dangerous metaphors; at worst, uncritical borrowings from early bourgeois political philosophy.[3]

3. On the family as the 'economic unit of society' see Engels 1972, pp. 138, 139, 223, 235, 236n. On the family as the 'cellular form of civilized society' see Engels 1972, pp. 121–2, 129, 131, 137; see also Marx and Engels 1975a, p. 46, and Marx 1973b, p. 484. For a similar analysis, see Brown 1978, pp. 38–41.

Finally, the *Origin*'s discussion of the family as the site of a struggle between the sexes accords with the dual-systems perspective. While Engels underscores the simultaneous emergence of sex- and class-conflict, he never achieves a clear picture of their connection. The two developments remain historically parallel phenomena, whose theoretical relationship is best characterised as one of autonomy. For the propertied family, women's oppression has its source in the husband's need to preserve and transmit his private property. Obviously, the absence of private property should be accompanied by an absence of sex-conflict. In fact, as Engels is forced to acknowledge, women occupy a subordinate place in propertyless households. Engels offers no theoretical basis for this historic oppression, although the preface's concept of systematic 'production of human beings themselves' hints obliquely at a distinct mechanism.

The *Origin* does not entirely neglect the social-reproduction perspective. It is implicit when Engels states that participation in public production offers the path to emancipation for the proletarian woman, when he insists that domestic work must be converted into a public industry, or when he argues that the single family must cease to be the economic unit of society. These assertions function as important insights which need, however, to be supported theoretically. Why does participation in public production offer a precondition for social equality? What does it mean to say the family's aspect as an economic unit must be abolished? In what sense is the family an economic unit? How are these issues linked to the requirement that domestic work be converted into a public industry? Unfortunately, Engels never manages to provide the explicit theoretical underpinning necessary to answer these questions properly. Marx had presented the outlines of a theory of the reproduction of labour-power and the working class that could, in principle at least, have constituted the starting point. But such a serious extension of Marx's work represented an undertaking for which Engels lacked time and, perhaps, motivation. With the publication of the *Origin*, Engels's contradictory blend of the dual systems- and social-reproduction perspectives became, in effect, the unstable theoretical foundation for all subsequent socialist investigation of the so-called woman-question.

The unrecognised gap between the two perspectives widened as the struggle between Marxism and revisionism intensified in the Second International. Whereas Engels had managed to combine both perspectives, however awkwardly, in a single text, subsequent analyses tended more clearly to emphasise one at the expense of the other. In general, the dual-systems perspective dominated within the reformist wing of the socialist movement, while a rough version of the social-reproduction perspective underlay the occasional efforts by opponents of reformism to address the question of women.

Behind the mass of data in August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, for instance, is a conceptual framework thoroughly in accord with the dual-systems perspective. The book's position within the terms of the dual-systems perspective is established, first of all, by Bebel's assumption that the category 'woman' represents an appropriate theoretical starting point. Despite ritual assertions that the 'solution of the Woman Question coincides completely with the solution of the Social Question', Bebel treats the phenomenon of women's oppression as analytically separable from social development as a whole. He argues, furthermore, that women's individual dependence on men is the source of their oppression in class-society, but fails to situate that dependence within overall social reproduction. In short, Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* puts the sex-division of labour and the relationship of dependence between women and men, taken as empirically obvious and ahistorical givens (at least until the advent of socialist society), at the heart of the problem of women's oppression.

Next to the theoretical and political confusion that permeates *Woman and Socialism*, Engels's analysis in the *Origin* has considerable force and clarity. Rather than zig-zagging erratically between the so-called woman- and social questions, he concentrates on the social phenomena that produce woman's position in a given society, and on the conditions that might lead to changes in that position. He does his best, that is, to delineate the relationships among the factors involved in women's oppression – the family, sex-divisions of labour, property relations, class-society, and the state – at times hinting also at the more comprehensive concept of the reproduction of labour-power implicit in the social-reproduction perspective. Although Engels's discussion in the *Origin* sorely lacks the powerful theoretical and political insight that Marx might have brought to the subject, it moves well beyond Bebel's effort in *Woman and Socialism*.

The Avelings' pamphlet *The Woman Question* confirms, even more clearly than Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*, the dominance of the dual-systems perspective within the socialist movement. Like Bebel, the authors assert that the basis of women's oppression is economic dependence, but they fail to explain how, thus effectively severing the problem of women's subordination from its location within social development. The pamphlet's conceptualisation of woman's position mainly in terms of love, sexuality, marriage, divorce, and dependence on men, reinforces this theoretical demarcation between women, the family, and the sex-division of labour, on the one hand, and social reproduction, on the other. Finally, the pamphlet's explicit formulation of sex- and class-oppression as parallel phenomena, engendering parallel struggles whose relationship is never discussed, reveals most sharply its reliance on the dual-systems perspective.

At the theoretical level, the growing strength of reformism in the Second International undoubtedly found a reflection in the consolidation of the dual-systems perspective as the unspoken basis for any socialist efforts to address the

question of women. Against this position, the left wing of the socialist movement presented an implicit, if all-too undeveloped, challenge, which accorded with the general premises of the social-reproduction perspective. Thus, in their approach to the issue of women's subordination, Zetkin and Lenin, both leaders in the struggle against reformism, reject the universal categories of 'woman' or 'the family' as theoretical starting points. Instead, each focuses on the specificity of women's oppression in different classes in a given mode of production.

In her 1896 speech to the Party Congress, for example, Zetkin insists that the character of the so-called woman-question in capitalist societies is dependent on class. She identifies three distinct woman-questions, all demanding resolution, but differentiated by the source of oppression, the nature of the demands for equality, and the obstacles to achieving the demands. Refusing to consider the woman-question as a classless abstraction to be resolved in the future, she suggests a comprehensive programme of organisational activity. At the practical level, Zetkin's opposition to reformism took the form of a commitment to developing socialist work among women of all classes – work that would support reforms without falling into reformism, and simultaneously keep the revolutionary goal firmly in view. In contrast to many of her contemporaries in the socialist movement, she saw the fight for changes in the relations between women and men as a task for the present, not for some indefinite socialist future.

With more theoretical precision than Zetkin, if less originality and commitment, Lenin places the issue of women's subordination in the context of the reproduction of labour-power in class-society. His repeated emphasis on the decisive role of domestic labour reflects an understanding, heightened by the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution, of the material foundation of women's oppression. His grasp of the workings of capitalist social reproduction enables him to sketch the outlines of a theoretically coherent relationship between sex- and class-oppression, by means of the concept of democratic rights. These positions constitute the theoretical basis underlying Lenin's strategic clarity – never sufficiently implemented by the Bolsheviks in practice – on the importance of special work among women, on the need for mass women's organisations bringing together women of all classes, and on the problem of combating male ideological backwardness. Taken together, Zetkin's and Lenin's observations on women offer the rudiments of a specific use of the social-reproduction perspective to analyse women's oppression in capitalist society.

In the context of the modern women's movement in North America and Western Europe, specifically its socialist-feminist wing, the tension between the two perspectives has taken a new form. Whereas the socialist movement of the late nineteenth century sought mainly to differentiate its positions on the problem of women's oppression from those of liberal feminism, contemporary socialist feminism has developed as much in sympathetic response to the views of radical

feminism as to the failures of both liberal feminism and the socialist tradition. It is this advanced position, in part, that has enabled the socialist-feminist movement to make its many significant contributions.

In certain ways, theoretical work produced from within the socialist-feminist framework recreates the major characteristics of the dual-systems perspective. For example, socialist-feminist theorists tend, no matter what their stated intentions, to separate the question of divisions of labour and authority according to sex from social reproduction.[4] Furthermore, they remain generally unable to situate women's oppression theoretically in terms of mode of production and class. And they offer a one-sided emphasis on the family and issues of sexuality and personal dependence. Last, socialist feminists have not provided theoretical underpinning for their strategic emphasis on the integral role, in the struggle for socialism, of the autonomous organisation of women from all sectors of society. In these ways, socialist feminists often reproduce the weaknesses of the dual-systems perspective, but their work also points the way toward a more adequate theoretical grasp of the issue of women's oppression. In particular, they insist on the centrality of achieving a materialist understanding of woman's situation within the family – as child-bearer, child-rearer, and domestic labourer – as the key to the problem of the persistence of women's oppression across different modes of production and classes. It is here that socialist-feminist theorists have made especially important contributions. Those who focus on the task in terms of Marx's theory of social reproduction have renewed, furthermore, the elements of the social-reproduction perspective, and have deepened it in ways never achieved either by Marx or by the socialist tradition. In sum, the political seriousness of socialist-feminist involvement in theoretical work, fuelled by the continuing militancy of women in social movements around the world has both reproduced and transformed the tension between the two perspectives. On the one hand, socialist feminism revives the contradictory co-existence of the two theoretical perspectives, which originated with Marx and Engels, only to disappear under the pressures of revisionism. On the other, it moves well beyond limitations established in the earlier period.

Socialist-feminist theory unknowingly recapitulates, then, certain failures of the classical-socialist tradition, while also laying the basis to correct them. Like much of the socialist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it has, willy-nilly, adopted some positions that are essentially at odds with its commitment to Marxism and social revolution. Unlike that movement, however, it has not closed itself off to a revolutionary perspective, and therefore has every interest in transcending the contradiction.

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4. More recently, for example, Young intelligently demolishes the dualism of much of socialist-feminist theory, but then suggests an emphasis on 'gender division of labor analysis' that threatens to recreate the very dualism she wishes to avoid. Young 1981.

Chapter Ten
The Reproduction of Labour-Power

The argument in these pages has taken the form of a critical reading of certain socialist texts pertaining to women's oppression and women's liberation. It is time to sum up the results.

Marx, Engels, and their immediate followers contributed more to understanding the oppression of women than participants in the modern women's movement usually recognise. At the same time, the socialist tradition's approach to those issues presumed to make up the so-called woman-question has been not only incomplete but seriously flawed. In the absence of any stable analytical framework, socialists have had to rely for theoretical guidance on a potpourri of notions drawn from various sources. This hundred-year legacy of ambiguity still hampers work on the question of women, although recent developments suggest that the conditions now exist for resolving it, both in theory and in practice. Women today take an increasingly active role in revolutionary change around the world, thereby forcing socialist movements to acknowledge and facilitate their participation. Against this background, recent advances made by socialist-feminist theorists have a critical importance. They reflect a new impetus to develop an adequate theoretical foundation for socialist work on women. And they move beyond many of the weaknesses inherited from the socialist tradition.

Thus, objectively speaking, the concerns of socialists within the modern women's movement and of revolutionaries within the socialist movement have

converged. The relationship of women's struggles to social transformation, a question that is simultaneously practical and theoretical, once again appears as a pressing matter on the revolutionary agenda.

In the theoretical sphere, the first requirement for further forward motion is to abandon the idea that the so-called woman-question represents an adequate category of analysis. Despite its long history as a serious issue for socialists, the term turns out to have no coherent meaning as a theoretical concept. The various notions associated with it actually conceal, as socialist feminists have pointed out, a theoretical problem of fundamental significance: the reproduction of labour-power in the context of overall social reproduction. Socialist theorists have never sufficiently confronted this problem, yet the rudiments of a usable approach lie buried just below the surface of Marx's analysis of social reproduction in *Capital*.

The discussion in this and the following chapter suggests a theoretical framework that can situate the phenomenon of women's oppression in terms of social reproduction. Given the weak tradition of theoretical work on the question of women, some words of caution are in order. Theory is, of course, critical to the development of specific analyses of women's situation. Explicitly or implicitly, empirical phenomena must be organised in terms of a theoretical construct in order to be grasped conceptually. At the same time, theory is, by its very nature, severely limited. As a structure of concepts, a theoretical framework simply provides guidance for the understanding of actual societies, past and present. However indispensable this theoretical guidance may be, specific strategies, programmes, or tactics for change cannot be deduced directly from theory. Nor can the phenomenon of variation in women's situation over time, and in different societies, be addressed solely by means of theory. These are matters for concrete analysis and historical investigation. By contrast, the argument in these chapters is largely theoretical, and it is therefore necessarily abstract. No attempt is made to develop detailed analyses of women's oppression in, for example, contemporary capitalist society. Such studies, and the political conclusions and tasks they imply, will be undertaken elsewhere.

The phenomenon of women's oppression is a highly individual and subjective experience, often dissected in elaborate descriptive terms, with emphasis on issues of sexuality, inter-personal relations, and ideology. As Michèle Barrett observes, 'the women's liberation movement has laid great stress on the experiential aspects of oppression in marriage, in sexual relationships, and in the ideology of femininity and male dominance. In the establishment of "sexual politics" as a central area of struggle it has succeeded in drawing back the veil on privatized relationships. This politicization of personal life . . . is a major achievement of feminist activity and one from which Marxism has learnt a great deal'.

Barrett argues that such analyses are not enough, however, for they have 'tended to ignore the ways in which private oppression is related to broader questions of relations of production and the class structure'. In the following pages, the focus is on this latter question, in particular, on the economic, or material, aspect of women's situation. However restricted the approach may seem from the point of view of the desire for a full-blown exposition of women's oppression, it is necessary to establish these material foundations. Once laid, they will form the indispensable basis for further work. In sum, the starting point in these chapters is a theoretical perspective on social reproduction, but the ultimate goal is to confront the twin problems of women's oppression and the conditions for women's liberation.[1]

To situate women's oppression in terms of social reproduction and the reproduction of labour-power, several concepts need to be specified, beginning with the concept of labour-power itself. Marx defines labour-power as something latent in all persons: 'By labor-power or capacity for labor is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description'. A use-value is 'a useful thing' something that 'by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another'. Use-values, and the useful labor that may go into their production, exist in every society, although the precise social form they take varies. 'So far . . . as labor is a creator of use-value, is useful labor, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race'. Labour-power, which is simply the capacity for useful labour, is therefore also 'independent of every social phase of [human] existence, or rather, is common to every such phase'.[2]

Labour-power is a latent capacity borne by a human being. Its potentiality is realised when labour-power is put to use – consumed – in a labour-process. Once having entered the labour-process, the bearer of labour-power contributes labour, for 'labor-power in use is labor itself'.[3] Labour-power must, therefore, be distinguished from the bodily and social existence of its bearer.

Labour-processes do not exist in isolation. They are inserted in determinate modes of production. Furthermore, any production is, at one and the same time, reproduction. 'A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and as flowing on with incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the same time,

1. Barrett 1980, p. 79. I would like to thank Ira Gerstein for his many perceptive comments on the theoretical arguments in this and the following chapter.
2. Marx 1971a, pp. 164, 43, 50, 179.
3. Marx 1971a, p. 173.

a process of reproduction'. Social reproduction entails, finally, the reproduction of the conditions of production. For example, in feudal society, 'the product of the serf must . . . suffice to reproduce his conditions of labor, in addition to his subsistence'. This is 'a circumstance which remains the same under all modes of production. For it is not the result of their specific form, but a natural requisite of all continuous and reproductive labor in general, of any continuing production, which is always simultaneously reproduction, i.e. including reproduction of its own operating conditions'.[4] Among other things, social reproduction requires that a supply of labour-power always be available to set the labour-process in motion.

The bearers of labour-power are, however, mortal. Those who work suffer wear and tear. Some are too young to participate in the labour-process, others too old. Eventually, every individual dies. Some process that meets the ongoing personal needs of the bearers of labour-power as human individuals is therefore a condition of social reproduction, as is some process that replaces workers who have died or withdrawn from the active work force. These processes of maintenance and replacement are often imprecisely, if usefully, conflated under the term reproduction of labour-power.[5]

Despite the linguistic similarity of the terms production and reproduction, the processes that make up the reproduction of labour-power and those that form part of a society's production are not comparable from a theoretical point of view. Reproduction of labour-power is a condition of production, for it *re*posits or *re*places the labour-power necessary for production. Reproduction of labour-power is not, however, itself a form of production. That is, it does not necessarily involve some determinate combination of raw materials and means of production in a labour-process whose result is the product labour-power. While some have argued that the reproduction of labour-power is a production-process taking place in family-households, in fact such activities represent only one possible mode of renewing the bearers of labour-power. Labour-camps or dormitory facilities can also be used to maintain workers, and the work-force can be replen-

4. Marx 1971a, p. 531; Marx 1971b, p. 790.

5. The term reproduction of labour-power has also been used in a variety of other ways. It is sometimes employed to designate processes associated with the development of skills and the maintenance of ideological hegemony. For example, the educational system in capitalist society plays an important part in social reproduction and has been analysed in terms of its role in the so-called reproduction of labour-power. Still another use of the term refers to the labour involved in the production and distribution of the means of subsistence. Workers in restaurants and clothing factories in capitalist society are said, for instance, to contribute to the reproduction of labour-power. While these various uses of the term reproduction of labour-power are suggestive, they disregard the special character of labour that is socially organised into an economy as opposed to labour that is not. See also the comments in Hindess and Hirst 1975, Chapter 1.

ished through immigration or enslavement as well as by generational replacement of existing workers.

To give preliminary theoretical shape to the problem of the reproduction of labour-power, Marx introduced the concept of individual consumption (discussed in Chapter 5). Individual consumption refers to the individual direct producer's consumption of means of subsistence. Marx underscores the difference between individual consumption and the productive consumption that takes place in the social-labour process. 'Such productive consumption is distinguished from individual consumption by this, that the latter uses up products, as means of subsistence for the living individual; the former, as means whereby alone, labor, the labour-power of the living individual, is enabled to act. The product, therefore, of individual consumption, is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption, is a product distinct from the consumer'.[6]

As used here, the concept of individual consumption refers essentially to the daily processes that restore the direct producer and enable him or her to return to work. That is, it does not cover generational replacement of existing workers, nor the maintenance of non-labouring individuals, such as the elderly and the sick. Neither does it pertain to the recruitment of new workers into the labour-force by, for example, enslavement or immigration. Individual consumption concerns solely the maintenance of an individual direct producer already enmeshed in the production-process; it permits the worker to engage, again and again, in the immediate production-process.[7]

The concept of individual consumption refers, then, to the reproduction of labour-power at the level of the immediate production-process. At the level of total social reproduction it is not the individual direct producer but the totality of labourers that is maintained and replaced.[8] It is evident that such renewal of the labour-force can be accomplished in a variety of ways. In principle, at least, the present set of labourers can be worked to death, and then replaced by an

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6. Marx 1971a, p. 179.

7. Marx was not at all consistent in his discussion of the concept of individual consumption. At times he clearly restricts it to the daily maintenance of the individual direct producer. Elsewhere, he slips into formulations that imply it covers the maintenance and renewal of the worker 'and his family'. Socialist feminists have pointed to these inconsistencies as evidence of the inadequacies of the Marxist tradition. The difficulty lies not only with the remarks, but with the absence of any sustained examination of wage-labour in the other volumes of *Capital*, which consider social reproduction as a whole. Had Marx completed his original plan, which projected a separate volume on wage-labour, some of the problems might have been rectified. On the plans for *Capital*, see note 42 of Chapter 5.

8. For the question of theoretical levels, see Establet 1973, and Gerstein 1976. The wording 'total social reproduction' is used here to refer to the theoretical level at which Volume III of *Capital* operates, or, in Gerstein's terms, to 'the complex unity of production and circulation'. Gerstein 1976, p. 265; see also pp. 253–6.

entirely new set. In the more likely case, an existing labour-force is replenished both generationally and by new labourers. Children of workers grow up and enter the labour-force. Women who had not previously been involved begin to participate in production. Immigrants or slaves from outside a society's boundaries enter its labour-force. To the brief extent that Marx considered these questions in general terms, he spoke of laws of population. 'Every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone. An abstract law of population exists for plants and animals only, and only in so far as man has not interfered with them'.[9] Moreover, not all present labourers will work in a subsequent production-period. Some will become sick, disabled, or too old. Others may be excluded, as when protective legislation is enacted to prohibit child-labour or women's night-work. In sum, at the level of total social reproduction, the concept of the reproduction of labour-power does not in the least imply the reproduction of a bounded unit of population.[10]

The discussion so far has not required that the gender of direct producers be specified. From a theoretical perspective, it does not yet matter whether they are women or men, so long as they are somehow available to make up the labour-force. What raises the question of gender is, of course, the phenomenon of generational replacement of bearers of labour-power – that is, the replacement of existing workers by new workers from the next generation. If generational replacement is to happen, biological reproduction must intervene. And here, it must be admitted, human beings do not reproduce themselves by parthenogenesis. Women and men are different.

The critical theoretical import of the biological distinction between women and men with respect to child-bearing appears, then, at the level of total social reproduction. While reproduction of labour-power at the level of total social reproduction does not necessarily entail generational replacement, it is at this theoretical level that the issue must be located.

Before proceeding further, a popular analytical misconception should be acknowledged. People ordinarily experience the processes of generational replacement in individualised kin-based contexts, and attempts to develop a theory of the reproduction of labour-power often focus on the family-unit or household as a starting point. Such a procedure, however understandable, represents a serious confusion with respect to theoretical levels. As commonly understood, the family is a kin-based social structure in which take place processes

9. Marx 1971a, p. 592.

10. The distinction of theoretical levels makes it clear that the domestic-labour debate discussed in Chapter 2 properly concerns the problem of individual consumption at the level of the immediate production-process in the capitalist mode of production – and not, as it seemed to some at the time, the reproduction of labour-power in general.

contributing to the worker's daily maintenance – his or her ongoing individual consumption. Families also provide the context in which children are born and grow up, and they frequently include individuals who are not currently participating in the labour-force. In most societies, families therefore act as important sites for both maintenance and generational replacement of existing and potential workers.[11] They are not, however, the only places where workers renew themselves on a daily basis. For example, many workers in South Africa live in barracks near their work, and are permitted to visit their families in outlying areas once a year. Furthermore, children do not necessarily constitute a family's only contribution to the replenishment of society's labour-power. Other family-members may at times enter the work force, at harvest, for instance, or during economic crises. Finally, families are not the only source of such replenishment; other possibilities, as previously mentioned, include migration and enslavement of foreign populations. These observations demonstrate that the identification of the family as the sole site of maintenance of labour-power overstates its role at the level of immediate production. Simultaneously it fetishises the family at the level of total social reproduction, by representing generational replacement as the only source of renewal of society's labour-force.

In any case, it is premature from a theoretical point of view to introduce a specific social site of the reproduction of labour-power, such as the family, into the discussion at this stage. Two further observations should, however, be made concerning the existence of a biological distinction between women and men in the area of child-bearing. First, biological differences constitute the material precondition for the social construction of gender-differences, as well as a direct material factor in the differential position of the sexes in a society.[12] Second, sex-differences cannot be considered apart from their existence within a definite social system, and nothing more can be said, at this point, about their significance for the process of the reproduction of labour-power. The concepts pertaining to the question of the reproduction of labour-power have been developed so far without reference to a specific mode of production. Hence, the discussion has necessarily proceeded at an extreme level of abstraction – or, as Marx puts it, speaking of the labour-process, 'independently of the particular form it assumes under given social conditions'.[13] Let us move, now, to a consideration of the reproduction of labour-power in class-society.

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11. For a sensible discussion of common-sense meanings of the term family, see Rapp 1978.

12. On the social construction of sex-differences, see: Barrett 1980, pp. 74–7; Benería 1979; Brown 1978; Edholm, Harris and Young 1977; Molyneux 1977. For a fine critique of this literature, see Sayers 1982. See also the works cited in note 22 of this chapter.

13. Marx 1971a, p. 173.

The appropriation of surplus-labour, or exploitation, constitutes the foundation of class-relations. In a class-society, the ruling class appropriates surplus-labour performed by an exploited class of direct producers. Marx sums up the essence of class-society in an important passage:

> The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labor is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers – a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and thereby its social productivity – which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.[14]

In a class-society, the concept of labour-power acquires a specific class-meaning. Labour-power refers to the capacity of a member of the class of direct producers to perform the surplus-labour appropriated by the ruling class. In other words, the bearers of labour-power make up the exploited class. For a class-society, the concept of the reproduction of labour-power pertains, strictly speaking, to the maintenance and renewal of the class of bearers of labour-power subject to exploitation. While a class-society must also develop some process of maintaining and replacing the individuals who make up the ruling class, it cannot be considered part of the reproduction of labour-power in society. By definition, labour-power in a class-society is borne only by members of the class of direct producers.[15]

Marx contrasts the surplus-labour performed by direct producers in a class-society to their necessary labour, defining both kinds of labour in terms of the time expended by a single producer during one working day. Necessary labour is that portion of the day's work through which the producer achieves his own reproduction. The remaining portion of the day's work is surplus-labour, appropriated by the exploiting class.[16] In reality, a portion of the direct producer's

14. Marx 1971b, p. 791; see also Marx 1971a, p. 209.

15. Socialist-feminist discussions of the reproduction of labour-power sometimes stretch the term, implicitly if not explicitly, to include the renewal of individuals in the ruling class. In so doing, they not only produce conceptual confusion, they do away with the essential distinction between classes – that between exploiters and exploited.

16. Marx 1971a, pp. 208–9, 226–9.

labour may also be devoted to securing the reproduction of other members of the exploited class. Where, for example, children, the elderly, or a wife do not themselves enter into surplus-production as direct producers, a certain amount of labour-time must be expended for their maintenance. Marx was never explicit about what is covered by the concepts of individual consumption and necessary labour. As discussed above, the concept of individual consumption has been restricted here to the direct producer's immediate maintenance. Necessary labour is used, however, to cover all labour performed in the course of the maintenance and renewal of both direct producers and members of the subordinate class not currently working as direct producers.

Necessary labour ordinarily includes several constituent processes. In the first place, it provides a certain amount of means of subsistence for individual consumption by direct producers. In a feudal society, for example, direct producers may retain a portion of the total product. In a capitalist society, wages permit the purchase of commodities in the market. In most cases, the raw means of subsistence so acquired do not themselves ensure the maintenance of the labourer. A certain amount of supplementary labour must be performed in order that the necessaries can be consumed in appropriate form: firewood must be chopped, meals cooked, garden-plots tended, clothes repaired, and so forth. In addition to these labour-processes facilitating the individual consumption of direct producers, two other sets of labour-processes can be identified. A portion of necessary labour goes to provide means of subsistence to maintain members of the exploited classes not currently working as direct producers – the elderly, the sick, a wife. And an important series of labour-processes associated with the generational replacement of labour-power may also take place – that is, the bearing and raising of the children of the subordinate class. As discussed above, these various aspects of necessary labour have a certain autonomy from a theoretical point of view. Together they represent an indispensable condition for the reproduction of labour-power and therefore for overall social reproduction. It should be noted that the concept of necessary labour pertains strictly to tasks associated with the reproduction of labour-power in the exploited class. Individuals in the ruling class also require daily maintenance and ordinarily replace themselves through generational reproduction. Such activities do not qualify as necessary labour in Marx's sense, however, for they do not concern the renewal of exploitable labour-power.

In a given class-society, the circumstances and outcome of the processes of reproduction of labour-power are essentially indeterminate or contingent. To maintain otherwise would be to fall into the functionalist argument that a system's needs for labour-power must inevitably be fulfilled by the workings of that system. The social relations through which necessary labour is carried

out therefore cannot be postulated independently of specific historical cases. In particular, the family, however defined, is not a timeless universal of human society. As with any social structure, the form kin-based relationships take always depends on social development, and is potentially a terrain of struggle.[17]

Although analytically distinct, necessary labour and surplus-labour may lose their specificity and separateness when experienced in the real life of concrete labour-processes. Several examples suggest the range of possibilities. First, in a feudal society in which serfs pay rent in kind, bringing the lord a share of the product, necessary labour and surplus-labour interpenetrate as labour-processes. In the case of labour-rent, by contrast, in which serfs work the lord's fields independently from their own plot, a clear spatial and temporal demarcation divides surplus-labour from necessary labour. In capitalist societies, as we shall see in Chapter 11, a distinction appears between two components of necessary labour, one carried out in conjunction with surplus-labour and the other taking place outside the sphere of surplus-labour appropriation.

Last, consider the hypothetical example of a slave-system that imports labourers from outside its boundaries, and forces them to work at a literally killing pace. Under such conditions, generational replacement might become almost impossible, and the amount of necessary labour could be reduced to nearly zero.

Of the three aspects of necessary labour – maintenance of direct producers, maintenance of non-labouring members of the subordinate class, and generational replacement processes – only the last requires, in an absolute sense, that there be a sex-division of labour of at least a minimal kind. If children are to be born, it is women who will carry and deliver them. Women belonging to the subordinate class have, therefore, a special role with respect to the generational replacement of labour-power. While they may also be direct producers, it is their differential role in the reproduction of labour-power that lies at the root of their oppression in class-society. This differential role can be situated in theoretical terms. The paragraphs that follow, which elaborate the argument first made by Paddy Quick, offer such a theoretical framework as a basis for the analysis of women's oppression.[18]

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17. O'Laughlin 1977, pp. 6–7; Rapp 1979, pp. 319, 321–2; Vogel 1978. For discussions of functionalism in socialist-feminist theory, see Barrett 1980, pp. 93–6, and Sayers 1982, p. 202.

18. Quick 1977. In addition to her consideration of women's oppression in class-society, Quick develops a contrast between class- and non-class- societies, arguing that 'it is only in class society that the involvement of women in child-bearing results in the oppression of women' (p. 45). Along similar lines, she makes the radical suggestion that ' "the family" . . . is a term applicable only to class societies, in which production (and reproduction) have a meaning distinct from the organization of production in the interests of society as a whole (i.e. communist societies, both primitive and advanced)' (p. 47).

The argument hinges on the relationship of child-bearing to the appropriation of surplus-labour in class-society. Child-bearing threatens to diminish the contribution a woman in the subordinate class can make as a direct producer and as a participant in necessary labour. Pregnancy and lactation involve, at the minimum, several months of somewhat reduced capacity to work.[19] Even when a woman continues to participate in surplus-production, child-bearing therefore interferes to some extent with the immediate appropriation of surplus-labour. Moreover, her labour is ordinarily required for the maintenance of labour-power, and pregnancy and lactation may lessen a woman's capacity in this area as well. From the ruling class's short-term point of view, then, childbearing potentially entails a costly decline in the mother's capacity to work, while at the same time requiring that she be maintained during the period of diminished contribution. In principle, some of the necessary labour that provides for her during that time might otherwise have formed part of the surplus-labour appropriated by the ruling class. That is, necessary labour ordinarily has to increase somewhat to cover her maintenance during the child-bearing period, implying a corresponding decrease in surplus-labour. At the same time, child-bearing is of benefit to the ruling class, for it must occur if the labour-force is to be replenished through generational replacement. From the point of view of the dominant class, there is, therefore, a potential contradiction between its immediate need to appropriate surplus-labour and its long-term requirement for a class to perform it.

The argument outlined in the previous paragraph analyses the potential implications of an empirical phenomenon – women's capacity to bear children – for the processes of surplus-labour appropriation. The discussion operates, it must be emphasised, at the level of theory, and it reveals a contradiction. To resolve the contradiction in an actual society, the dominant class prefers strategies that minimise necessary labour over the long term while simultaneously ensuring the reproduction of labour-power. To what extent it actually succeeds in implementing such strategies is, of course, a matter of class-struggle.

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19. For discussions of the relationship between biology, sex-divisions of labour, and women's oppression, see Barrett 1980, pp. 72–7, 195–9, and Sayers 1982. Mark Cousins claims that the biological distinction of sex cannot be addressed by Marxism, for 'the capitalist and the labourer are personifications [that are] abstract to and indifferent to the problem of sexual difference'. Cousins 1978, p. 63. By contrast, Marx did not disregard the role of biology in social reproduction. He insisted, for example, that the mortality of direct producers necessitates their maintenance and replacement, thereby making the problem of the reproduction of labour-power critical to the social reproduction of class-society. In the case of capitalism, 'reproduction of labor-power forms, in fact, an essential of the reproduction of capital itself'. Marx 1971a, pp. 575–6. If the biological fact of mortality is central to Marxist analysis, why not the biological fact of sexual dimorphism as well!

As one element in the historical resolution of the contradiction, actual arrangements for the reproduction of labour-power usually take advantage of relationships between women and men that are based on sexuality and kinship. Other adults, ordinarily the biological father and his kin-group, or male kin of the child-bearing woman herself, historically have had the responsibility for making sure that the woman is provided for during the period of diminished activity associated with child-bearing. Men of the subordinate class thereby acquire a special historical role with respect to the generational replacement of labour-power: to ensure that means of subsistence are provided to the child-bearing woman.

In principle, women's and men's differential roles in the reproduction of labour-power are of finite duration. They come into play only during the woman's actual child-bearing months. In reality, the roles take specific historical form in the variety of social structures known as the family. From a theoretical point of view, families in subordinate classes may be conceptualised as kin-based social units within which men have greater responsibility for the provision of means of subsistence to child-bearing women during the period of their reduced working contribution. As institutionalised structures in actual class-societies, the families of a subordinate class ordinarily become major social sites for the performance of the maintenance as well as the generational-replacement aspects of necessary labour. Here, then, is one source for the historical division of labour according to sex that assigns women and men different roles with respect to necessary and surplus-labour. Generally, women have greater responsibility for the ongoing tasks associated with necessary labour, and especially for work connected with children. Men, correspondingly, often have greater responsibility for the provision of material means of subsistence, a responsibility that is ordinarily accompanied by their disproportionately greater involvement in the performance of surplus-labour.

While women have historically had greater responsibility for the ongoing tasks of necessary labour in class-societies, it is not accurate to say that there is some universal domestic sphere separate from the world of public production. In class-societies based on agriculture – feudalism, for example – the labour-processes of necessary labour are frequently integrated with those of surplus-production.[20] It is the development of capitalism, as Chapter 11 shows, that creates a sharp demarcation between the arena in which surplus-labour is performed and a sphere that can properly be called domestic. To the extent that analysts assert the universality of some invariant domestic sphere, they are in fact projecting onto non-capitalist class-societies a distinction that is the product of capitalist relations of production.

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20. See, for example, Middleton 1979.

The exact form by which men obtain more means of subsistence than needed for their own individual consumption varies from society to society, but the arrangement is ordinarily legitimated by their domination of women and reinforced by institutionalised structures of female oppression. The ruling class, in order to stabilise the reproduction of labour-power as well as to keep the amount of necessary labour at acceptable levels, encourages male supremacy within the exploited class. Quick outlines the dynamic:

> Any attempt by women to appropriate to themselves more than is required for their subsistence is an indirect demand for part of the surplus appropriated by the ruling class. Thus male authority over women is supported and even enforced by the ruling class. On the other hand, any attempt by men to evade their 'responsibilities' for the support of women is also resisted, within the confines of a system which relies on male supremacy. Men's control of means of subsistence greater than needed for their own reproduction on a day-to-day level is 'granted' to them only in order to enable them to contribute to the reproduction of their class.[21]

Such strategies work on behalf of the dominant class, whatever the immediate advantages of male supremacy to men.

It is the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the child-bearing period, and not the sex-division of labour in itself, that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class-society. The fact that women and men are differentially involved in the reproduction of labour-power during pregnancy and lactation, and often for much longer, does not necessarily constitute a source of oppression. Divisions of labour exist in all societies. Even in the most egalitarian hunting and gathering society, a variety of tasks is accomplished every day, requiring a division of labour. Differences among people arising out of biological and social development also characterise every society. Some individuals may be mentally retarded or physically handicapped. Some may be heterosexual, others homosexual. Some may marry, some may not. And, of course, some may be men, and others women, with the capacity to bear children. The social significance of divisions of labour and of individual differences is constructed in the context of the actual society in which they are embedded. In class-societies, women's child-bearing capacity creates contradictions from the point of view of the dominant class's need to appropriate surplus-labour. The oppression of women in the exploited class develops in the process of the class-struggle over the resolution of these contradictions.

Women in the ruling class may also be subordinated to the men of their class. Where such subordination exists it rests, ultimately, on their special role with

21. Quick 1977, p. 47.

respect to the generational replacement of individual members of the ruling class. As the socialist tradition has argued, the issue, here, is property. If property comes to be held by men and bequeathed to children, female oppression becomes a handy way to ensure the paternity of those children. In a particular society, shared experiences of and cultural responses to female oppression may produce a certain degree of solidarity among women across class-lines. While this solidarity has a basis in reality, and can be of serious political import, the situations of women in the dominant and exploited classes are fundamentally distinct from a theoretical perspective. Only women in the subordinate class participate in the maintenance and replacement of the indispensable force that keeps a class-society going – exploitable labour-power.

The existence of women's oppression in class-societies is, it must be emphasised, a historical phenomenon. It can be analysed, as here, with the guidance of a theoretical framework, but it is not itself deducible theoretically. Confusion as to the character of women's oppression has frequently generated an unproductive search for some ultimate theoretical cause or origin of women's oppression. Origins exist, of course, but they are historical, not theoretical.[22]

The argument to this point may be recapitulated as follows. Human beings have the capacity to produce more use-values than they need for their own immediate subsistence. In a class-society, this potential is organised to the benefit of a ruling class, which appropriates the surplus-labour of a subordinate class according to some determinate set of social relations. For this class-society to survive, an exploitable labour-force must always be available to perform surplus-labour. Workers, however, do not live forever; they suffer 'wear and tear and death, [and] must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labor-power'. Where replacement is through generational reproduction, the fact that human beings fall into two distinct biological groups, women and men, comes into play. Women's somewhat diminished capacity to work during the child-bearing period potentially creates a contradiction for the ruling class. Out of the class-struggle over resolving this contradiction, a wide variety of forms of reproduction of labour-power has developed in the course of history. In virtually all cases, they entail men's greater responsibility for provision of material means of subsistence, women's greater responsibility for the ongoing tasks of necessary labour, and institutionalised forms of male domination over women. While exceptions exist, and may indeed offer important insights on the question of reproduction of labour-power in class-society, the historical legacy remains

22. For discussion of the historical origins of women's oppression, see Alexander 1976; Benería 1979; Caulfield 1981; Ciancanelli 1980; Deere and León de Leal 1981; Godelier 1981; Middleton 1979; Young 1981.

one that has been characterised, for better or worse, as patriarchal. In this sense, Joan Kelly is right to point out that 'patriarchy . . . is at home at home. The private family is its proper domain'.[23]

In most class-societies, women of the exploited class participate to some extent in surplus production as well as in necessary labour.[24] Their specific responsibilities and subordination in the tasks of necessary labour may carry consequences for the work they do in the area of surplus-production. For instance, individual responsibility for child-care in capitalist society renders women exceptionally vulnerable to the oppressive conditions of home-work. Conversely, involvement in surplus-labour may affect the forms of women's necessary labour. On American plantations, for example, most slave-women worked in the master's fields, while the tasks of cooking and child-care were collectively carried out by older women and very young children.[25] At a particular juncture in the development of a given class-society, the oppression of women in the exploited class is shaped not only by women's relationship to the processes of maintenance and renewal of labour-power, but by the extent and character of their participation in surplus-labour.

The actual working out of a specific class-society's forms of reproduction of labour-power is a matter for historical investigation – and, in the present, for political intervention as well. Certain tendencies can be deduced, however, from the theoretical framework just presented. In situations that minimise the importance of generational replacement of labour-power, sex-divisions of labour and family-institutions in the exploited class may be relatively weak. If a ruling class relies on migrant-labour from outside the society's boundaries, for example, it might house these workers in barracks, put women and men to work at similar jobs, encourage contraception or sterilisation, and ignore the effects of heavy work on women in the last months of pregnancy. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides the major part of a society's need for the reproduction of labour-power. Here, a severe labour-shortage caused by war, famine, or natural catastrophe would tend to exaggerate the contradictory pressures on women workers. Depending on the historical situation, either the role of the family as the site of generational reproduction, or the importance of women's participation in surplus-labour, or both, might be emphasised. During a period in which the ruling class's need to maximise surplus-labour overwhelms long-range con-

23. Marx 1971a, 168; Kelly-Gadol 1975–6, p. 821.

24. Similarly, men ordinarily participate, to some extent, in the immediate tasks of necessary labour. It is important to recognise that personal maintenance tasks (washing oneself, brushing one's teeth, and so on) constitute necessary labour, as does the work involved in getting to the site of production (walking six miles to the mill, commuting to the office by train, and so on).

25. Alexander 1976; Davis 1971.

siderations, all individuals in the exploited class might be mobilised into surplus-production, causing severe dislocation in its institutions of family-life and male dominance. Such was the case in industrialising England during the nineteenth century, and, such, it can be argued, is again the case in the advanced capitalist countries today.

These tendencies will not proceed unopposed. Migrant-workers may fight against their isolation from kin. Native-born workers may oppose the use of foreign labour. Women may refuse to stay home to bear and raise children. Men may resist the participation of women in the labour-force. Workers may support legislation banning child-labour. Women and men may organise to defend the existing forms of their institutions of family life. In short, the processes of the reproduction of labour-power in class-society ordinarily constitute an important terrain of battle.

Chapter Eleven

Beyond Domestic Labour

The preceding chapter established some basic concepts pertaining to the reproduction of labour-power, and used them to address the question of women's oppression in class-society. We can now turn to the problem of women's oppression in the context of capitalist social reproduction. In capitalist societies, exploitation takes place through the appropriation of surplus-value, and surplus-labour appears in the form of wage-labour. Labour-power acquires the particular form of a commodity, bought and sold on the market. This commodity possesses the peculiarly useful property, as Marx discovered, of being a source of value. Although it is exchanged in the market, it is not a commodity like any other, for it is not produced capitalistically. Instead, some process of reproduction of the bearers of exploitable labour-power continually brings labour-power into being as a commodity. Such a process is a condition of existence for capital. In Marx's words, the worker 'constantly produces material, objective wealth, but in the form of capital, of an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist as constantly produces labor-power, but in the form of a subjective source of wealth, separated from the objects in and by which it can alone be realized; in short he produces the laborer, but as a wage-laborer. This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the laborer, is the *sine qua non* of capitalist production'. Such dramatic statements are true in a broad sense, but they shed little light on the theoretical status of

the reproduction of labour-power in capitalist society, and even less on the manner in which it takes place.[1]

Capitalist reproduction demands that labour-power be available as a commodity for purchase in adequate quantity and quality and at an appropriate price. However imperfectly, these needs shape the processes that maintain the existing bearers of labour-power, while at the same time the labour-force as a whole is continually reconstituted to accord with future needs. The manner in which the sellers of labour-power live out their lives is, in principle, a matter of indifference to the capitalist class. By contrast, it represents a central concern for the bearers of labour-power. In this sense, the circumstances under which reproduction of labour-power takes place, which include the determination of its price, are always an outcome of class-struggle.

Several characteristics of the reproduction of labour-power and women's oppression in capitalist society arise from the logic of capitalist accumulation itself. Perhaps most consequential is the special form taken by necessary labour. Necessary labour becomes divided into two components. One, which we can call the social component of necessary labour, is indissolubly bound with surplus-labour in the capitalist production-process. As Marx showed, the working day in capitalist employment includes a certain amount of time during which the worker produces value equivalent to the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of his or her labour-power. This is, for Marx, the worker's necessary labor, for which he or she is paid. For the rest of the working day, the worker produces surplus-value for the capitalist, value for which he or she is not paid. From the point of view of the worker, however, no distinction exists between necessary and surplus labour-time, and the wage appears to cover both. In Marx's words, 'the wage-form thus extinguishes every trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labor and surplus labor, into paid and unpaid labor. All labor appears as paid labor'.[2]

Marx did not identify a second component of necessary labour in capitalist society, one that we can call the domestic component of necessary labour –

1. Marx 1971a, pp. 535–6; similar statements appear on pp. 533, 537, 538, and 542, as well as in Marx 1973b, pp. 458, 676–7, 717n. Marx's famous comments that the labourer 'belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the process of production', a performance 'the capitalist may safely leave . . . to the laborer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation', implicitly recognise reproduction of labour-power as a process that must remain external to capitalist commodity-production. His unfortunate phrasing, quite rightly the object of feminist criticism, appears to exempt the process from theoretical examination, however, and conceals the kernel of genuine theoretical insight. Marx 1971a, pp. 536–7. Molyneux argues that 'domestic labour, as privatised individual labour not subject to the law of value, *lies outside the theory of the capitalist mode of production*', but she does not deny the importance of developing a Marxist analysis of domestic labour in capitalist society: Molyneux 1977, p. 20.

2. Marx 1971a, p. 505.

or domestic labour. Domestic labour is the portion of necessary labour that is performed outside the sphere of capitalist production. For the reproduction of labour-power to take place, both the domestic and the social components of necessary labour are required. That is, wages may enable a worker to purchase commodities, but additional labour – domestic labour – must generally be performed before they are consumed. In addition, many of the labour-processes associated with the generational replacement of labour-power are carried out as part of domestic labour. In capitalist societies, then, the relationship between surplus- and necessary labour has two aspects. On the one hand, the demarcation between surplus-labour and the social component of necessary labour is obscured through the payment of wages in the capitalist labour-process. On the other hand, the domestic component of necessary labour becomes dissociated from wage-labour, the arena in which surplus-labour is performed.

As accumulation proceeds, the opposition between wage-labour and domestic labour sharpens. Capitalism's drive to increase surplus-value by enhancing productivity, especially through industrialisation, forces a severe spatial, temporal, and institutional separation between domestic labour and the capitalist production-process. Capitalists must organise production so that more and more of it is under their direct control in workshops and factories, where wage-labour is performed for specified amounts of time. Wage-labour comes to have a character that is wholly distinct from the labourer's life away from the job, including his or her involvement in the domestic component of necessary labour. At the same time the wage mediates both daily maintenance and generational-replacement processes, supplemented or sometimes replaced by state-contributions. That is, the social component of the worker's necessary labour facilitates the reproduction of labour-power indirectly, by providing money that must then be exchanged to acquire commodities. These two characteristics – the separation of wage-labour from domestic labour and the payment of wages – are materialised in the development of specialised sites and social units for the performance of domestic labour. Working-class families located in private households represent the dominant form in most capitalist societies, but domestic labour also takes place in labour-camps, barracks, orphanages, hospitals, prisons, and other such institutions.[3]

3. The units for the performance of the domestic component of necessary labour can be analysed in terms of what has been called the double 'separation' of the direct producer, who neither 'owns' nor 'possesses' the means and conditions of capitalist production. The payment of wages and the isolated domestic-labour site embody this double separation. Wage-labourers cannot appropriate, or own, surplus-value. Neither can they activate, or possess, the concrete labour-process. In this sense, the payment of wages corresponds to the worker's lack of ownership of any property, save his or her own labour-power. Spatial, temporal, and institutional separation of the site of domestic labour from that of wage-labour reflects the worker's inability to set the instruments of social labour

In capitalist societies, the burden of the domestic component of necessary labour rests disproportionately on women, while the provision of commodities tends to be disproportionately the responsibility of men, fulfillable through participation in wage-labour. This differential positioning of women and men with respect to surplus-labour and the two components of necessary labour, which is generally accompanied by a system of male supremacy, originates as a historical legacy from oppressive divisions of labour in earlier class-societies. It is then strengthened by the particular separation between domestic and wage-labour generated by the capitalist mode of production. Domestic labour increasingly takes place in specialised social units, whose isolation in space and time from wage-labour is further emphasised by male supremacy. These conditions stamp domestic labour with its specific character.

Experientially, the particular nature of domestic labour in industrial-capitalist society gives rise, for both women and men, to intense feelings of opposition between one's private life and some public-sphere. The highly institutionalised demarcation of domestic labour from wage-labour in a context of male supremacy forms the basis for a series of powerful ideological structures, which develop a forceful life of their own. Isolation of the units of domestic labour appears to be a natural separation of women from men as well. Confinement to a world that is walled off from capitalist production seems to be woman's time-honoured natural setting. A series of correlated opposites embodies the seemingly universal division of life into two spheres of experience: private and public, domestic and

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in motion. In sum, the bearers of labour-power are in a state of non-ownership and non-possession of the means and conditions of production. From this point of view, the units for the performance of domestic labour constitute a special subset of social units in capitalist society. They are concrete forms taken by the relation between the working class's non-ownership and non-possession of the means and conditions of production. Note Poulantzas's characterisation of the enterprise as 'the concrete form of the relation between an economic ownership and a possession that both belong to capital'. Poulantzas 1975, p. 123. See also Althusser and Balibar 1970, and Bettelheim 1975. Because these social units materialise a definite relationship to the means and conditions of production – namely, non-ownership and non-possession on the part of the bearers of labour-power – they cannot be viewed as private enclaves developing in relative isolation from the processes of capitalist production. The form, composition, and internal structure of the special set of social units acting as sites for domestic labour are, in fact, directly affected by the course of capitalist accumulation.

In a limited sense, the social units in which the domestic component of necessary labour takes place are the counterparts of capitalist enterprises. From this point of view, Bettelheim's discussion of the 'displacement of the limits' of the enterprise with the rise of monopoly-capitalism suggests a similar conceptualisation of the development of family-households in capitalist society. The removal of certain functions from the private household, for example, and the development of collective consumption, represent analogous displacements of limits. It must be emphasised that to speak of the units of domestic labour as counterparts to those of capitalist production implies no simple parallelism.

social, family and work, women and men. Rooted in the economic workings of the capitalist mode of production, and reinforced by a system of male supremacy, this ideology of separate spheres has a force that is extremely difficult to transcend. Where some categories of male workers command wages sufficient to maintain a private household staffed by a non-working wife, the ideology takes a particularly stubborn institutional form.

The drive for accumulation causes constant change in capitalist societies, including changes in the quantity and character of the domestic component of necessary labour. As Marx demonstrated, capitalist accumulation depends on the growth of surplus-labour, appropriated in the form of absolute and relative surplus-value.[4] He discussed these two forms of augmented surplus-value in terms of a particular society's established working day of ten hours in capitalist production, divided into five hours each of necessary and surplus-labour. If the hours of work are extended to, say, twelve hours, the capitalists appropriate two hours' worth of absolute surplus-value for each worker. If the amount of necessary labour falls to, say, four hours, they appropriate an hour's worth of relative surplus-value for each worker. While both processes contribute to capitalist accumulation, relative surplus-value ordinarily plays a greater part, for the established working day of an individual can only be extended so far. Marx analysed two major ways of producing relative surplus-value that are available to the capitalists: introduction of machinery, technological improvements, and the like, and reduction in the costs of the means of subsistence. Together, he noted, they fuel capitalism's penetration into all sectors of social life.

Capital's need to augment surplus-value implies a contradiction between domestic labour and wage-labour. As a component of necessary labour, domestic labour potentially takes away from the commitment workers can make to performing surplus-labour through participation in wage-work. Objectively, then, it competes with capital's drive for accumulation. If one tends one's own garden plot, chops one's own firewood, cooks one's own meals, and walks six miles to work, the amount of time and energy available for wage-labour is less than if one buys food in a supermarket, lives in a centrally-heated apartment-building, eats in restaurants, and takes public transportation to work. Similarly, if one supports another person, for example a wife, in order that she take care of domestic labour, that person is less available to participate in wage-labour, while at the same time one's own wage must cover the costs of her means of consumption. To the extent that the domestic labour of a capitalist society takes place within private households, the pressure of capitalist accumulation results in a tendency to decrease the amount performed in each household. That is, the

4. Marx 1971a, Chapters 12 and 16.

domestic component of necessary labour is severely reduced. At the same time, more household members may enter the work force, increasing the total amount of wage-labour performed by the household, a phenomenon akin to intensification of a single worker's labour. In short, reduction of domestic labour potentially creates both relative and absolute surplus-value.

A major way to reduce domestic labour is to socialise its tasks. Laundromats, stores selling ready-made clothing, and fast-food chains, for instance, remove domestic-labour tasks to the profit-making sector, where they also provide new opportunities for capitalist entrepreneurs. Public education and health-care make aspects of domestic labour the responsibility of the state, at the same time distributing the costs of the reproduction of labour-power more widely through contributions and taxes. A society's total domestic labour can also be reduced by employing institutionalised populations (prison-labour, army-labour), and by importing migrant-labour from outside national boundaries. Over time, the tendency to reduce domestic labour affects the units in which it is performed in numerous ways, many of which have been documented by scholars in terms of changes in the family and in the relationship between work and the family. The history of the tendency's impact on sites of the reproduction of labour-power that are not based on kin-relations (prisons, dormitories, migrant-labour camps) is less well-studied.

The domestic component of necessary labour cannot be completely socialised in capitalist society. The main barrier is economic, for the costs are extremely high in such areas as child-rearing and household-maintenance.[5] Profitable chains of day-care centres have yet to be developed, for example, and housecleaning services have not been able to reduce costs to a level that makes them available to working-class households. Political and ideological barriers to the socialisation of domestic labour also play a role. Socialisation of work formerly done in the home may be experienced as an attack on established working-class lifestyles, as when the introduction of public education encountered opposition among some working-class militants fearful of capitalist indoctrination. The recent expansion of nursing-home care for the elderly has sometimes been opposed as part of a general decline in so-called traditional family-values. Working-class families in capitalist societies have generally welcomed advances in the socialisation of domestic-labour, however. In so doing they register their appreciation of the labour saved, as well as of the potential qualitative enhancement of social experience.[6] A different type of political barrier to the socialisation of domestic labour exists in the case of migrant-workers housed in dormitories or

5. Blumenfeld and Mann 1980; Holmstrom 1981.
6. The liberating potential inherent in the socialisation of domestic labour was especially evident in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see Hayden 1981.

labour-camps. Such arrangements reduce domestic labour and cheapen the cost of renewal, but, as recent events in South Africa show, they also represent a political threat to the ruling class by facilitating organisation. An ultimate barrier to the socialisation of domestic labour is constituted by biology. While domestic labour might conceivably be reduced to a minimum through the socialisation of most of its tasks, the basic physiological process of child-bearing will continue to be the province of women.[7]

The tendency for domestic labour to be reduced in capitalist society remains, of course, no more than a general trend. Actual arrangements develop out of and depend on the history of a particular society, and are affected by class-conflict within it. It is in this context that such phenomena as the family-wage, female labour-force participation, discrimination against women in the labour-market, protective legislation, and child-labour laws must be analysed. Generally speaking, the specific amounts and kinds of domestic labour performed in a particular society are an outcome of the struggle between contending classes at several levels. Domestic labour has, in fact, a highly contradictory role within capitalist social reproduction. On the one hand, it forms an essential condition for capitalism. If capitalist production is to take place, it must have labour-power, and if labour-power is to be available, domestic labour must be performed. On the other hand, domestic labour stands in the way of capitalism's drive for profit, for it also limits the availability of labour-power. From the point of view of capital, domestic labour is simultaneously indispensable and an obstacle to accumulation. Over the long term, the capitalist class seeks to stabilise the reproduction of labour-power at a low cost and with a minimum of domestic labour. At the same time, the working class, either as a united force or fragmented into competing sectors, strives to win the best conditions possible for its own renewal, which may include a particular level and type of domestic labour.

Domestic labour takes as its raw material a certain quantity and quality of commodities bought with the wages workers obtain by selling labour-power on the market. How are wages determined?

In Marx's view, the value of labour-power is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour incorporated in the means of subsistence needed to maintain and replace the labourer. That is, the value of labour-power equals the value of the commodities the worker requires. Marx cautions, however, that

7. In their desire for equality and liberation, feminists have sometimes tried to abolish the role of biology. For example, Firestone calls for 'the freeing of women from the tyranny of their biology by any means available', including artificial reproduction outside the womb. Firestone 1970, p. 206. See Sayers 1982 for discussion of the contradictory and anti-materialist character of such positions.

into the determination of this value enters a 'historical and moral element'. Two other factors also affect the determination of the value of labour-power: first, the costs of developing labour-power with the appropriate skills; and second, 'its natural diversity, the difference between the labor power of men and women, of children and adults', a fact that 'makes a great difference in the cost of maintaining the family of the laborer, and in the value of the labor power of the adult male'. Throughout most of his argument, Marx makes the simplifying assumption that the effect of these various factors can be excluded.[8]

Recent work on the value of labour-power, particularly that developed in the context of socialist feminism, has pointed to ambiguities in Marx's formulation. Of special interest, here, is the discussion centred on the role of non-working women and other dependents supported by the worker's wage. The question of the contribution, if any, made by domestic labour to the determination of the value of labour-power has given rise to a prolonged controversy known as the domestic-labour debate (reviewed in Chapter 2). The most satisfactory answer to this question was first proposed by Ira Gerstein and developed in a more rigorous fashion by Paul Smith. Both argue that domestic labour, as concrete, useful labour, simply transfers the value of the commodities purchased with the wage to the labour-power borne by the worker. The norm of the family-wage – a wage paid to a single male worker sufficient to cover the consumption of his entire family – represents, for Gerstein, a specific instance of how the 'historical and moral element' affects the determination of the value of labour-power.[9] That is, wage norms not only include a certain quantity and quality of commodities, they also imply a certain quantity and quality of domestic labour.

The wage of a worker corresponds, then, to the total value of the commodities required for his or her maintenance and replacement in particular, historically-established, conditions. These conditions may or may not include such non-working dependents as wives, children, aged parents, and so forth. Existence of the family-wage for some male workers has prompted discussion concerning the proper interpretation of the 'historical and moral element' in this case. Some claim that the family-wage represents a higher standard of living and therefore a victory for the working class in its battle with capital. The family-wage has been available, however, only to certain sectors within the working class; most working-class households in capitalist societies cannot manage on one income. Other commentators therefore argue that the family-wage functions as a con-

8. Marx 1971a, pp. 168, 486. For a more detailed exposition of Marx's discussion of the value and price of labour-power, and of wages, see Chapter 5.

9. Gerstein 1978; Smith 1978. Smith does not address the question of the destination of the value contained in the means of subsistence consumed by non-working household-members, and says nothing about the family-wage. The implication is that persons not engaged in wage-labour somehow fall outside the capitalist mode of production.

cession made by capital to certain sectors of the working class in return for a political stability based on male supremacy. In this view, the family-wage constitutes not a victory but a privilege offered to a sub-group of male workers. This controversy cannot be resolved in the abstract. The significance of the demand for, and achievement of, the family-wage must be ascertained through concrete analysis, not logical deduction. It should be clear, however, that the presence of a non-working wife does not lower the value of male labour-power, and therefore is not of inevitable benefit to the capitalist class. Quite the contrary: to have a wife not in the labour-force requires a male wage large enough to cover the consumption of two adults. The capitalist class will evaluate such a wage-level very carefully, weighing economic costs against political and ideological benefits and pressures.[10]

Socialists have sometimes endorsed the family-wage as part of a general strategy to defend the working-class family, meaning a heterosexual nuclear unit with a single male wage-earner. Defending the working class's right to the best conditions for its own renewal in no way entails a particular fixed social form, however. In some situations, the demand for a family-wage may actually distort the legitimate fight for the best conditions possible for the reproduction of the working class as bearers of labour-power. For example, where female-headed households make up a large sector of the population, demand for a family-wage will most likely threaten women's position in the labour-market and deepen divisions already existing within the working class. In short, the specific content of socialist demands in the area of the reproduction of labour-power (as elsewhere) must flow from a concrete analysis. As a first condition for developing such an analysis, socialists need to discard rigid ideological notions about the working-class family as invariant, as the sole social unit in which labour-power is maintained and replaced, and as the always-deserving recipient of a family-wage.

Viewed from the perspective of overall social reproduction, the reproduction of labour-power is not, it must be recalled, a bounded process of renewal of a fixed unit of population. Capitalist reproduction requires only that a more or less adequate labour-force be available to set the production process in motion. In principle, capitalists may work the present labour-force to death, so long as they have some means of recruiting a new one. In practice, they generally adopt other alternatives. Ordinarily, a society's active labour-force is made up of some

10. For the controversy over the interpretation of the family-wage, see Barrett and McIntosh 1980. For clear discussions of how a dependent wife not in the labour-force raises (rather than lowers) the value of labour-power, see Holmstrom 1981 or Molyneux 1979.

mix of established and new workers – the latter including children of established workers, members of the industrial reserve-army, and immigrants.

At this level, the reproduction of labour-power becomes a question of the reproduction of the working class as a whole. The term working class is sometimes interpreted as referring solely to wage-workers. In this usage, for instance, only women-workers would be considered working-class women. Such categorisation abandons all those not in the labour-force – children, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as non-working wives – to a theoretical limbo outside the class-structure. Here, the working class will be viewed as consisting of a society's past, present, and potential wage-labour force, together with all those whose maintenance depends on the wage but who do not or cannot themselves enter wage-labour. At any given moment, it comprises the active labour-force, the industrial reserve-army, and that portion of the relative surplus-population not incorporated in the industrial reserve-army. The history of capitalism demon strates that this last category has, at times, included very few persons, aside from infants and toddlers. Even those seriously handicapped from birth have sometimes been forced into the labour-market, and have, therefore, belonged, however tenuously, to the industrial reserve-army.

In order to place women theoretically in terms of the working class, some analysts have assigned them as a group to the industrial reserve-army. Women, they argue, form a reserve, which can easily be called upon during periods of expansion and returned to the home when no longer needed. Women not only participate in this cyclical movement, they represent an increasingly important element of the contemporary floating, latent, and stagnant layers within the industrial reserve-army. Most such discussions suggest, finally, that women's entry into the ranks of the industrial reserve-army is rather recent, and leave unanswered the question of their previous location within the working class. While this analysis of women in terms of their position in the industrial reserve-army is suggestive, a more adequate view would acknowledge that major sectors of the female population have been present in the industrial reserve-army for decades, even if, in Engels's words, 'it is only at times of exceptionally good trade that they realize [it]'. Those working-class women not in the industrial reserve-army would form part of the relative surplus-population.[11]

The question of women's position with respect to the industrial reserve-army is not, in fact, a theoretical one, but a matter for concrete analysis. Which groups of women in a given society move more actively between the industrial reserve-army and wage-labour? How large are the numbers and how intense the par-

11. Engels 1972, p. 98. For a summary of the recent discussion about women and the industrial reserve-army, see Simeral 1978. See also: Anthias 1980; Barrett 1980, pp. 24–7, 158–62; Bruegel 1979.

ticipation in the various sectors? Which groups of women remain locked in the relative surplus-population outside the industrial reserve-army, and why? What are the political and ideological obstacles to certain women's entry into wage-labour? What are the determinants of any movement that can be observed? In a particular capitalist society, for example, unmarried daughters living in their father's households may work until marriage. Elsewhere, daughters from rural areas may migrate to industrial concentrations, where they become the major support of families left behind. Women in immigrant, but not in native households, or black, but not white mothers of school-age children, may enter wage-labour. Wives may normally hold jobs until children are born, or after children enter school, or after they leave home. In periods of intensifying labour-exploitation, mothers of pre-school children may engage in wage-labour. As Veronica Beechey points out, 'the question of who constitutes the preferred sources of the industrial reserve army in any given historical situation must be concretely investigated. It cannot be derived from the logic of capitalism, but is determined by the class struggle – by the strategies employed by individual capitals, by trade union practices, and by state policies which are themselves a product of class struggle'.[12] Beechey argues that married women in Britain have been an important sector of the industrial reserve-army since World-War II. To which it must be added that the general trend in the advanced capitalist countries is toward equalisation of participation rates among different categories of women, in the direction of increased commitment of all women to wage-labour. In the United States, for example, labour-force participation rates among different groups of women have been converging. As many white as black wives are in the workforce, more mothers of very young children are now working, and so forth.

Equalisation of female labour-force participation is a particular manifestation of the structural tendency in capitalist society toward free availability of all labour-power. Like the tendency toward the reduction of domestic labour, this tendency embodies the forward drive of capitalist accumulation. Marx discussed it explicitly in the context of his analysis of competition among individual capitals. Capital moves from sectors of relatively low profit-rate into sectors of high profit-rate, thereby contributing to the equalisation of the rate of profit in different branches of production and among different individual capitals. The more mobile capital and labour-power can be, the more easily and quickly can competition work its effects in establishing an average rate of profit. In principle, then, capitalist accumulation demands perfect mobility of labour-power and hence, in Marx's words, 'the abolition of all laws preventing the laborers from transferring from one sphere of production to another and from one local

12. Beechey 1980, p. 58.

center of production to another; indifference of the laborer to the nature of his labor; the greatest possible reduction of labor in all spheres of production to simple labor; the elimination of all vocational prejudices among laborers; and last but not least, a subjugation of the laborer to the capitalist mode of production'. Where barriers to mobility exist, the force of capitalist expansion attempts to push them aside. If certain obstacles remain in place, they may in part reflect the contradictory position of the capitalist class, caught within the conflicting pressures of its long-term economic demand for perfect mobility, its short-term requirements for different categories of workers, and its need to maintain political and ideological hegemony over a divided working class. To the extent that women remain segregated within and without the labour-force, such conflicting factors play an important role.[13]

As those primarily responsible for domestic labour, women contribute heavily to the maintenance and renewal of the relative surplus-population, as well as the active labour-force. Traditionally, as Marx observes, 'society in its fractional parts undertakes for Mr. Capitalist the business of keeping his virtual instrument of labor – its wear and tear – intact as reserve for later use'.[14] The working class pays for most of the upkeep of the surplus-population, and working-class women do most of the domestic tasks required. To the extent, however, that women enter wage-labour, they become less able to take care of members of the household not presently in the work force. In a particular situation, the advantages to capital of increased female labour-force participation may outweigh the inroads into women's capacity to perform domestic-labour. State-intervention of various kinds may then become more important in the maintenance of the relative surplus-population. In the United States today, for example, elderly and disabled persons increasingly become the direct responsibility of governmental agencies.

To this point, the concept of the reproduction of labour-power in capitalist society has been developed as an economic phenomenon. Political and ideological issues have entered the discussion mainly in the course of describing the way structural tendencies located at the economic level take specific form in actual societies. There is, however, an important political phenomenon that has its root in the economic workings of the capitalist mode of production. The tendency toward equality of all human beings, a fundamental political feature of bourgeois society, has a basis in the articulation within the economic level of production

13. Marx 1971b, p. 196. Gaudemar has developed the concept of the tendency toward perfect mobility of labour-power. Not once, however, does he consider the barrier formed by the existence of domestic labour and the family-household (Gaudemar 1976).

14. Marx 1973b, pp. 609–10.

and circulation. (This is not to say that equality of persons, even in formal terms, is an inevitable accompaniment of capitalist relations of production. As it turns out, numerous obstacles get in the way of the development of this tendency. The extent to which the tendency toward equality of persons becomes a reality in a specific society depends on its historical development, and in particular on the strength of popular social movements in the subordinate classes.)

As Marx showed, the idea of equality takes different forms in different societies, only attaining a firm foundation with the capitalist mode of production. 'Equality and freedom presuppose relations of production as yet unrealized in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages'.[15] Two aspects of equality in capitalist society are of interest for the analysis of women's oppression: first, the manner in which the phenomenon of equality of persons is embedded in the economic workings of the capitalist mode of production itself; and second, the transformations of this phenomenon with the evolution of capitalism.

The particular form taken by equality in capitalist society derives, ultimately, from the special character of commodities. A commodity is a product of labour that possesses both value and use-value. In the opening pages of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx analyses the nature of commodities with great care, showing that value arises in a process of equalisation of human labour. The exchange of commodities puts the great variety of concrete useful labour that produces them on an equal footing. Through the exchange of these commodities, 'the private useful labor of each producer ranks on an equality with that of all others'. Commodities can be exchanged because they each embody a certain amount of the same thing: human labour in the abstract, that is, value. 'The equality of all sorts of human labor is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values'. The existence of value requires that differences among various types of labour be disregarded. 'The equalization of the most different kinds of labor can be the result only of an abstraction from their inequalities, or of reducing them to their common denominator, viz. expenditure of human labor-power or human labor in the abstract'. In sum, equalisation of differences in human labour is a fundamental characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, providing the basis for the formation of value.[16] Expansion of capitalism brings with it, furthermore, an increasing equalisation of labour. Accumulation demands that human labour more and more take the form of undifferentiated abstract labour.

The very labour-power that, when put to use, releases labour, is itself a commodity, albeit a somewhat peculiar one. Like all commodities, labour-power has both value and use-value. Its value, as we have seen, consists of the sum of the

15. Marx 1973b, p. 245. See also Engels 1947, pp. 124–9.
16. Marx 1971a, pp. 78, 76–7, 78. See also Marx 1971a, Chapter 1, Sections 2 and 4; Marx 1970a, Chapter 1; Rubin 1972, chapters 10–14.

values of the commodities required for the maintenance and replacement of its human bearer, taking into account the particular 'historical and moral' circumstances. Its use-value, from the point of view of the capitalist, is its ability in production to contribute more value than it has itself, thereby yielding surplus-value. As a commodity, labour-power is bought and sold on the market. The worker enters the market bearing his or her commodity – labour-power – and looking for a buyer. Similarly, the capitalist comes to the market, carrying his commodity – money – and seeking to purchase labour-power. Each is an owner, desiring to sell a mass of abstract human-labour congealed in a commodity. As commodity owners, they are equal traders who meet in the market to contract an exchange – the wage-bargain. Their transaction follows the laws of commodity exchange. To buy the worker's labour-power, the capitalist must offer a wage that is equivalent to its value. Marx devoted considerable effort to showing that this exchange of equivalents 'on the basis of equal rights' of buyer and seller goes hand in hand with the exploitation characteristic of capitalist production.[17] In the sphere of circulation, paradoxically, the requirements of the capitalist mode of production itself decree that equality must reign.

In order for capitalists to buy labour-power, its bearers must be able to sell it. That is, the bearers of labour-power have to enter the market as independent traders, seeking an exchange of equivalents. In Marx's ironic words, wage-labourers must be 'free in the double sense'. First, they have to be the free owners of their labour-power, able to dispose of it as they wish. They cannot, for example, be enmeshed in feudal restrictions, personally dependent and incapable of autonomous action. Second, they must be free of any other way to put their labour-power to use for their own account. Those who have other sources of subsistence will not easily submit to the capitalist's demands. It is precisely this double freedom that forces workers onto the market to sell their labour-power.[18]

Equality of persons is situated in the sphere of circulation, where labour-power is bought and sold. 'To be sure', Marx observes, 'the matter looks quite different if we consider capitalist production in the uninterrupted flow of its renewal, and if, in place of the individual capitalist and the individual worker, we view in their totality, the capitalist class and the working class confronting each other. But in so doing we should be applying standards entirely foreign to [the wage bargain]'.[19] Class-relations are rooted in the process of capitalist production, not in the sphere of circulation where the individual wage-bargain

17. Marx 1971a, p. 165. See also Marx 1971a, pp. 156–7, 164–6, 172, 188, 547–50. On the laws of the exchange of commodities, see Marx 1971a, pp. 88–96, 106–15.

18. Marx 1971a, pp. 164–7. This 'double freedom' embodies the double separation discussed in note 3 of this chapter.

19. Marx 1971a, p. 550. See also the citations in note 16 of this chapter.

is concluded. It is in the production-process that the labour-power bought on the market is consumed and surplus-value produced. In the sphere of production, the rules of exploitation and economic power, rather than political equality, govern relations between capitalists and workers.

Powerful forces of class-oppression therefore lurk behind the tendency toward equality of persons established in the sphere of circulation. The phenomenon of individual freedom is not, however, an illusory projection of capitalist social relations. Rather, it is a real tendency, bound to class-exploitation by the very logic of capitalist reproduction. Capitalism couples political freedom with economic constraint in a tension that is characteristic of bourgeois society. It is this contradiction that Lenin analysed in terms of the concept of democratic rights.

Equality of persons is not, then, simply an abstract political principle or a false ideology. It is a complex phenomenon with material roots in capitalist relations of production. As capitalism develops, more and more social processes come under capital's domination, with accompanying tendencies toward increasing equalisation of human labour and, potentially, increasing equality of persons. In reality, these tendencies meet a variety of obstacles, and history shows that capitalism is, in fact, compatible with a stratified labour-market as well as with highly undemocratic political arrangements. Even in those societies with a relatively continuous history of democracy, the phenomenon of equality of persons undergoes significant transformation over time.

In the early stages of capitalist society, the phenomenon of equality of persons emerged against a background of feudal restrictions on property and person. Early capitalism extended an inspiring pledge of freedom from such restrictions to all individuals, regardless of personal differences. Slave, serf, or free, propertied or propertyless, man or woman – to each capitalism offered hope of equality, freedom, and liberation. While the pledge of equality was fulfilled for some, large categories of the population ordinarily remained unfree, or at least excluded from full civil and political equality. The Declaration of Independence declared, for example, that it is 'self-evident' that all persons are 'created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness'. Nonetheless, the United States Constitution excluded slaves, women, and the propertyless from equal status as citizens. Much of the history of the last century reflects struggles to achieve the basic freedom to dispose of one's person and property denied to these groups.[20]

Two hundred years after the beginnings of industrial capitalism, gross civil and political inequalities have largely disappeared. Bourgeois society's promise

20. For good discussions of the nature of equality in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see: Dawley 1976, pp. 1–10, 60–8, 207–11; DuBois 1978, pp. 40–7; Du Bois 1971, Chapters 1–2.

of equality remains in force, however, and campaigns to make it even more of a reality continue. Today, the kinds of personal differences that demand to be equalised are far more subtle. In the United States, for example, blacks and women pursue struggles started long ago, but now with a more finely drawn interpretation of discrimination. In addition, every ethnic or racial group that has a distinct history organises to eradicate its particular heritage of inequality. And numerous other sectors that have been identified as collectively different – homosexuals, the elderly, the disabled, ex-mental patients, even the obese – document their discrimination and fight for their rights.

Demands for equality in the late twentieth century in part reflect the trend toward the perfection of the conditions for the free sale of labour-power. At the same time, they embody the high degree of equalisation of human-labour that occurs with the extension of the sphere of value in advanced capitalism. Subjectively, they reveal an intensification of desire for the freedom promised by capitalism but never consistently delivered. Indeed, even as people struggle for it, the goal of equality within bourgeois society no longer seems so compelling, for it is increasingly losing its connotations of personal freedom and human liberation. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, capitalism's wonderful promises of equality and individual fulfilment clash more openly than ever with its brutal realities. An old question persists, now posed with new energy: Why sell one's labour-power – whether on a basis of equality or not – at all? Promising freedom from exploitation itself, socialist movements throughout the world suggest an answer.

Given the contradictory character of equality in capitalist society, struggles for democratic rights potentially have serious revolutionary import. To fight for equality means, in the first place, to demand and defend the best conditions possible for people within capitalist society. By their very nature, however, these conditions are severely limited. As Lenin puts it, 'capitalism combines formal equality with economic and, consequently, social inequality'.[21] The tendency to increasing equality has, therefore, a highly contradictory outcome. The more democratic rights are extended to all persons, the more the oppressive economic and social character of capitalism stands revealed. The struggle for equality threatens the dominance of capitalist social relations on two fronts. It promises to reduce divisions within and among oppressed classes, as well as between these classes and other sectors, by placing all persons on a more equal footing. Simultaneously, it exposes the foundation of bourgeois society to be class-exploitation, not individual equality. Far from a useless exercise in bourgeois reformism, the battle for democratic rights can point beyond capitalism.

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21. Lenin 1966, p. 80.

Many groups of varying make-up and character are denied equal rights within capitalist society. Some, like those comprised of persons of African or native-American origin in the United States, have specific histories as oppressed peoples. Their members' lack of equality derives from a history of oppression that relentlessly passes from generation to generation, stamping each person's experience from cradle to grave. Other groups, like homosexuals, the disabled, or the elderly, are made up of individuals with particular characteristics acquired more or less accidentally, and not necessarily shared by kin. These characteristics, which may or may not be permanent, form a basis for discrimination and denial of rights. Women in capitalist societies are neither an oppressed people with a distinct history nor a collection of individuals with certain characteristics. They are, rather, the 51 percent of human beings who have the capacity to bear children, which if done may replenish capital's supply of labour-power. Their lack of equality has, in other words, a specific character that distinguishes it from the denial of democratic rights to other groups. It is a specific character rooted in women's differential place within capitalist social reproduction. Correspondingly, the obstacles to the achievement of real social equality for women have their own character, separable from those blocking equality for other groups.

The discussion in this chapter has established a theoretical framework for analysing women's oppression in the context of capitalist social reproduction. Women's special position in capitalist society has two defining aspects. In the first place, as in all class-societies, women and men are differentially located with respect to important material aspects of social reproduction. In the second place, women, like many other groups in capitalist society, lack full democratic rights.

The differential location of women and men with respect to social reproduction varies according to class. Working-class women have disproportionate responsibility for the domestic component of necessary labour, that is, for the ongoing tasks involved in the maintenance and replacement of labour-power. Correspondingly, working-class men have disproportionate responsibility for the social component of necessary labour, that is, for provision of the means of subsistence that take the form of commodities, a responsibility they can only hope to fulfil by entering into wage-labour. In the capitalist class, women may have disproportionate responsibility for the processes involved in the generational replacement of individual class-members, while men may be disproportionately involved in maintaining the processes of capitalist accumulation. (The analysis of just which women in contemporary capitalist society fall into the category of working class is not attempted here. It properly forms part of the much debated and still confused Marxist investigation into the contemporary class-structure.

Insofar as this problem remains unresolved, the movement for women's liberation lacks necessary theoretical guidance.)

While only certain women perform domestic labour in capitalist society – namely, working-class women, whose efforts maintain and renew exploitable labour-power – all women suffer from a lack of equality under capitalism, at least in principle. Women's lack of equality constitutes a specific feature of women's oppression in capitalist as opposed to other class-societies. Discriminatory conventions that survive from earlier class-societies are supplemented and strengthened by newly developed mechanisms of bourgeois political discrimination. Both the legal system and an array of informal social practices support the oppression and inequality of women. At the same time, capitalism promises equality to all persons, and where it fails to deliver in the case of women, the lack is strongly felt. Like other groups denied equal rights, women struggle to achieve them. In the past, the feminist movement focused on the gross inequalities in civil society, especially those embedded in legal codes. In the advanced capitalist countries today, the battle for equality continues, and reaches into areas never dreamed of by nineteenth-century feminists. Women fight for equal rights in the so-called private sphere, formerly regarded as largely outside the scope of legal and social redress. For example, they focus on equality in the household, freedom of sexual choice, and the right to bear or not bear children. In the area of paid work, women push the issue of equality beyond demands for equal pay and equal opportunity, by calling as well for equal compensation for work of comparable worth. In essence, recent demands for equality often pose the question of the meaning of formal equality in a society based on real inequity. Advanced capitalist countries have become, furthermore, the first class-societies in which differences between women and men sometimes appear to outweigh differences between classes. In these countries, the expansion of the middle layers of the class-structure and the development of a homogenised consum-rist life-style combine with the still powerful demarcation between 'women's sphere' of domestic labour and 'men's sphere' of wage-labour to provide a context in which lack of equality with respect to men may seem to be the most consequential social factor in many women's lives. It is all too easy to overlook the fundamental distinction between the working class and other sectors of society. Socialist feminists insist that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is not, in any real sense, a sister, but other distinctions tend to fade.

The specific character of women's oppression in capitalist societies is established, in short, by women's particular dual position with respect to domestic labour and equal rights. At the same time, women's special status constitutes an obstacle to certain trends inherent in capitalist accumulation. Thus, barriers to female labour-force participation and isolation in a private household inhibit the

tendencies toward reduction of domestic labour and free availability of labour-power. Over time, most capitalist societies in fact experience a reduction of women's isolation as well as an increase in female participation in wage-labour. To the extent that the special status of women continues, it permits discrimination against them that may work in capital's favour. For example, wages for 'women's' jobs remain notoriously low. At the political level, women's lack of rights comes into increasing contradiction with the tendency to widen the scope of equality in advanced capitalist countries. In the twentieth century, the barriers to equality for women have been enormously reduced, revealing the underlying tension between formal and substantive equality. For many women, as for most members of other oppressed groups in capitalist society, bourgeois equality now shows itself as sharply distinct from liberation in a just society.

Lack of equality as a group constitutes the basis for women's movements that unite women from different classes and sectors. These movements will differ according to their interpretation, explicit or implicit, of the meaning of equality. Some may, for example, view equality of women and men within bourgeois society as an essentially satisfactory goal. Such movements would quite properly be called bourgeois women's movements. The contradictions of late capitalism make it likely, however, that women's movements will have at least some insight into the difference between bourgeois equality and real social equality. This could form a basis for the development of a women's movement oriented toward socialism. Over the past twenty years, women's movements in the advanced capitalist countries have often shown such potential. Unfortunately, the Left has rarely been capable of intervening constructively. Its weakness has resulted, in part, from the lack of an adequate theory of women's oppression.

The position advanced, here – which analyses women's oppression in terms of domestic-labour and equal rights – differs greatly from much socialist and socialist-feminist analysis. Socialist-feminist writings often locate women's oppression in capitalist society in their dual position as domestic workers and wage-labourers. In a typical formulation, Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas, and Hilary Wainwright assert, for example, that 'the central feature of women's position under capitalism is the fact that they are *both* domestic and wage labourers, that the two aspects of their existence are by no means harmoniously related and that this dual and contradictory role generates the specific dynamic of their oppression'. Jean Gardiner has elaborated the same distinction in terms of women's 'dual relationship to the class structure', directly as wage-labourers, and indirectly as family-members dependent on men and responsible for domestic labour.[22] This argument, which often appears in contemporary-socialist as

22. Coulsen, Magas and Wainwright 1975, p. 65; Gardiner 1977, p. 159.

well as socialist-feminist work focuses solely on economic phenomena. It fails to account for the oppression of women not in the working class, and cannot explain the potential for building progressive women's organisations that cross class-divisions, nor the possible obstacles to uniting women from distinct racial or national groups into a single women's movement. Put another way, the claim that women's oppression rests on their dual position with respect to domestic and wage-labour is economistic. Despite the socialist-feminist movement's commitment to the liberation of all women, to organisational autonomy, and to the importance of subjective experience, it has paradoxically embraced a view of women's oppression quite similar to the economism of much of the socialist tradition. By contrast, the argument that women's oppression is rooted in their dual position with respect to domestic labour and equal rights provides a framework for both understanding women's position in wage-labour and analysing how a broad-based women's liberation-movement may represent an essential component in the fight for socialism.

Although many changes in the character of domestic labour and the status of equal rights have taken place in the era of capitalist domination, women's oppression remains a fixture of capitalist society. As it does in every class-society, the ruling class manages, one way or another, to stabilise the reproduction of labour-power with a historically established minimum of necessary labour. The current constellation of domestic labour, women's rights, and female oppression represents the outcome of specific struggles over the reproduction of labour-power.

So long as capitalism survives, domestic labour will be required for its reproduction, disproportionately performed by women and most likely accompanied by a system of male supremacy.

It is now possible to situate, in theoretical terms, the working-class family in the context of capitalist social reproduction. In essence, the working-class family is a kin-based site for the reproduction of labour-power. Like most units for domestic labour in capitalist society, it is socially isolated from the realm of wage-labour. Ordinarily, the site takes the form of a household, or a series of households linked by networks of mutual obligation. For example, a working-class family may include several generations of adults, with their children, living in adjacent rental units. Or it may consist of two persons, with or without children, living in their own home. In the case of migrant-labour, a single worker may participate in two households. One will be in his or her place of origin, and include dependent kin; the other will be at work, and may take the form of dormitory quarters, lodgings, and the like. In most capitalist societies, working-class family households have the major responsibility for the processes that maintain and renew the bearers of labour-power.

Performance of the domestic component of necessary labour constitutes the material pivot of the working-class family-household. Given that this task has historically been carried out primarily by women, in a context usually characterised by male supremacy, the working-class family becomes a highly institutionalised repository of women's oppression. As domestic labourers in the private household, women seem to devote much of their time to performing unpaid services for wage-earning men, a situation that can give rise to antagonistic relationships between the sexes. In addition, women's political and social inequality, and their struggle to acquire rights, provide another potential source of conflict between the sexes. In this atmosphere of chronic tension within private family households, women's oppression may appear to be solely an oppression by men, rooted in a transhistorically-antagonistic sex-division of labour and embodied in the family. Nonetheless, it is responsibility for the domestic labour necessary to capitalist social reproduction – and not the sex-division of labour or the family *per se* – that materially underpins the perpetuation of women's oppression and inequality in capitalist society.

These comments provide, it must be emphasised, only a sketch of the material foundation for the working-class family. Its actual form and character vary widely, according to the specific historical development of a given capitalist society. Ordinarily, working-class family-experience reflects the contradictory role in capitalist social reproduction of domestic labour and the reproduction of labour-power. On the one hand, family life in capitalist society is generally characterised by male supremacy and women's oppression, producing tensions and conflict that may further fragment an already divided working class. On the other hand, families constitute important supportive institutions within working-class communities, offering meaning and warmth to their members, and potentially providing a base for opposition to attempts by the capitalist class to enforce or extend its economic, political, or ideological domination. In other words, the family is neither wholly a pillar of defence and solidarity for the working class, as some socialists would have it, nor an institution so torn by internal struggle and male domination that it must be abolished, as some socialist feminists might argue. Instead, working-class families generally embody elements of both support and conflict, bound together in a dynamic combination that is not necessarily fixed. Concrete investigation will reveal whether the supportive or the conflictual aspects dominate in a particular situation. In a successful strike, for example, solidarity within and among working-class families may be a major factor, although this defensive aspect of working-class family-life may recede after the conclusion of the battle. Elsewhere, a strike of male workers may be lost in part because organisers fail to involve dependent wives and children in support, thereby heightening already existing tensions in the family. Contention over the family-wage, or the sex-segregation of the occupational structure, also has roots

in the contradictory experience of working-class family-life. Indeed, nineteenth- and twentieth-century social history abounds with case-studies demonstrating the key and contradictory role of the working-class family: a haven for its members against the onslaughts of capitalist accumulation, yet simultaneously a concentrated locus of patriarchal relations.[23]

In the late twentieth century, the success of working-class and popular struggles has become increasingly dependent on the mobilisation of women as well as men. Male chauvinism and women's oppression in working-class families represent, therefore, a greater obstacle to the achievement of socialist goals than ever before. A socialist movement that uncritically supports existing forms of working-class family-life, or only perfunctorily addresses the problem of female subordination, risks alienating more than half its activists and allies. Conversely, popular movements that vigorously confront male chauvinism and oppose women's oppression have the potential to lay the groundwork for a future society in which the real social equality of women and men can be built.

So long as a society is dominated by the capitalist mode of production, an opposition between surplus-labour and necessary labour, and between wage-labour and domestic labour, will exist. While it is conceivable that the tendency and struggle for equal rights might reduce sex-differences in the performance of the domestic component of necessary labour to a minimum, that minimum would still assign disproportionate responsibility to women in their capacity as child-bearers, and potentially provide the material foundation for a system of male supremacy. Extension of democracy, no matter how wide, can never abolish capitalist exploitation, nor can it liberate women.

In a society not characterised by class-exploitation, the relationship between the processes of surplus-production and reproduction of labour-power is qualitatively distinct from that characterising societies in which exploitation dominates. In the former society, according to Marx, surplus-labour is identified by the nature of its contribution to social reproduction, not by the fact that it is privately appropriated. Surplus-labour produces that portion of the total social product that is surplus in several senses. Some of it is reserved for replacing depleted means of production, future expansion, insurance against catastrophe, administration-costs, and so on. The surplus-product also provides for the collective satisfaction of such needs as education and health-care. And it serves to maintain those individuals who for reasons of age, infirmity, etc., are currently not participating in production. For Marx, necessary labour in such a society seems to be simply that labour 'whose product is directly consumed individually by the producers and their families'. The labour that contributes to the reproduc-

23. Rayna Rapp summarises the literature on these variations in Rapp 1978–9.

tion of labour-power is not in antagonistic contradiction, furthermore, with the production of a surplus.[24] Anthropologists have examined this phenomenon in early human society, arguing that "domestic", or "family" production in such a society *is* public production'.[25] For socialists, a classless, or 'communist' society, in which all labour, whether necessary or surplus-labour, forms part of social production, represents the ultimate goal of socialist revolution. To arrive at the goal of communism, society must go through a long period of transition.

What becomes of domestic labour, the family, and the oppression of women in the course of the socialist transition? The question can, of course, only find adequate answers in the reality of an actual society's experience. Some general features of the transition period are, however, clear.

An opposition between two components of necessary labour – the one social, or public, and the other domestic, or private – continues in force during the socialist transition. Production cannot be organised all at once on a communist basis. Let us keep the term domestic labour to designate the necessary labour involved in the reproduction of labour-power performed outside the realm of public production. Evidently, domestic labour plays an important role during the socialist transition. At the same time, it begins a long process of transformation into an integral component of social production in a communist society.

As in capitalist society, a tendency exists to reduce the amount of domestic labour carried out in individual households. Rather than embodying the capitalist drive for accumulation, however, it represents the socialist tendency for all labour to become part of social production in a communist society. While reduction of this domestic labour contributes to the development of the productive forces, it does not result from blind tendencies at the economic level. In principle, socialist society lessens the burdens of domestic labour carried out in individual households in a planned and conscious manner, corresponding to the needs of the people as a whole.

A major political characteristic of the socialist transition is the transformation of democracy. In capitalist society, democracy always remains severely limited. Only male members of the propertied classes effectively possess the rights bourgeois society promises to all persons. To achieve real social equality, socialist society must eliminate the many restrictions that limit democracy to a small

24. Marx 1971b, p. 877. For the non-antagonistic relationship between surplus-production and the reproduction of labour-power, see also Marx 1970b; Marx 1971a, pp. 82–3, 496, and Marx 1971b, pp. 818–20, 847, 878. Although I follow Marx's usage, his retention of the terms necessary and surplus-labour for analysis of non-exploitative systems may be more confusing than helpful, as he himself suggests when he comments that 'a part of what is now surplus labor, would then count as necessary labor; I mean the labor of forming a fund for reserve and accumulation'. Marx 1971a, p. 496.

25. Caulfield 1981, p. 213. See also Leacock 1977.

minority. With respect to women, democracy for the majority in socialist society entails, in the first place, equal rights. Here, it is immediately obvious that laws alone are not sufficient. As an obstacle to effective equality for women, domestic labour has a stubborn material presence that no legislation, by itself, can overcome. A major index of socialist society is, then, the progressive reduction of the disproportionate burden placed on women by domestic labour. Two paths towards this goal are available. First, domestic labour itself can be reduced through the socialisation of its tasks. Second, the domestic labour that remains to be done outside public production can be shared among women, men, and, in appropriate proportion, children. Because domestic labour cannot be substantially reduced, much less eliminated overnight socialist society must take both paths in order to assure women real social equality.

Kin-based sites for the reproduction of labour-power – that is, families – have a definite role in social reproduction during the socialist transition. In principle, they differ on several important counts from working-class families in capitalist society. To an increasing extent, all family-members take part in public production and political life as equal individuals. At the same time, domestic labour within the family-household is progressively reduced. What domestic labour remains is shared on a more and more equitable basis.

Existing socialist societies have made important advances in the area of women's equal participation in public production and political life. On the whole they have been unable, however, to confront the problems of domestic labour and women's subordination in a systematic way. To some extent, efforts have been made to socialise domestic labour, but the oppressive division of labour within the family-household remains largely untouched. As a result, socialist feminists sometimes argue that the drawing of women into public production in socialist societies represents not liberation, but the imposition of a burdensome double shift. Only since the 1970s has the question of sharing housework and child-care responsibilities been considered in a few socialist countries. How adequate the concrete steps taken in this area are is a question that requires serious investigation.[26]

In the long run, the establishment of effective social equality between women and men in socialist society meets an obstacle in the real differences between

26. Cuba initiated discussion of sharing housework and child-care responsibilities around 1973, as did China, and the topic was considered in Albania as early as 1967. The Soviet Union has not yet given official support to equalising domestic responsibilities. For thoughtful studies on women in the socialist transition, see Croll 1978; Croll 1981–2; Molyneux 1982; Stacey 1983, as well as the works on the Soviet Union cited in note 7 of Chapter 8. In addition to documenting women's inequality in the household in socialist countries, these studies survey the persistence of a sex-division of labour in the areas of public production and political life that likewise disadvantages women. On Albania, see Omvedt 1975, especially pp. 25–6.

them, particularly in the area of child-bearing. As a transformation of the contradictions inherent in capitalist society, equality in socialist society has itself a contradictory character. In Marx's words, '*equal* right [in socialist society] is an unequal right for unequal labor'. That is, differences between people mean that equal remuneration for equal amounts of work in socialist society will most likely result in an unequal outcome. 'One worker is married, another not; one has more children than another and so on and so forth. Thus with an equal output, and hence an equal share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, and so on. To avoid all these defects, right, instead of being equal, would have to be unequal'.[27] Similarly, real social equality for women will actually require unequal treatment at certain times: maternity-leaves, lighter work during the later months of pregnancy, rest periods when necessary for menstruating women, and so on. In this way, the material conditions for women's full participation in all areas of social life – production, politics, culture, personal relations, and so forth – can be developed.

Socialist society does not, it is clear, abolish the family in the sense of doing away with individual social units in which domestic labour is performed. Neither does it eliminate the sex-division of labour. What it does do is undermine the foundation for the oppression of women within the individual household and in society. The extension of democracy, the drawing of women into public production, and the progressive transformation of domestic labour during the socialist transition open up the possibility for what Marx calls 'a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes'. The exact form such relations will take cannot be predicted in advance. As Engels argues, 'what we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear'. It is up to future generations to determine how they wish to live. 'When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual – and that will be the end of it'.[28]

Confronted with the terrible reality of women's oppression, nineteenth-century utopian socialists called for the abolition of the family. Their drastic demand continues to find advocates among socialists even today. In its place, however, historical materialism poses the difficult question of simultaneously reducing and redistributing domestic labour in the course of transforming it into an integral component of social production in communist society. Just as in the socialist transition 'the state is not "abolished", *it withers away*', so too, domestic labour

27. Marx 1970b, pp. 9–10.
28. Marx 1971a, p. 460; Engels 1972, p. 145.

must wither away.[29] The proper management of domestic labour and women's work during the transition to communism is therefore a critical problem for socialist society, for only on this basis can the economic, political, and ideological conditions for women's true liberation be established and maintained. In the process, the family in its particular historical form as a kin-based social unit for the reproduction of exploitable labour-power in class-society will also wither away – and with it both patriarchal family-relations and the oppression of women.

29. Engels 1947, p. 333; see also p. 338.

Appendix
Domestic Labour Revisited[1]

From the late 1960s into the 1970s, socialist feminists sought to analyse women's unpaid family-work within a framework of Marxist political economy.[2] Such an analysis would provide a foundation, they thought, for understanding women's differential positioning as mothers, family-members, and workers, and thereby for a materialist analysis of women's subordination. At the time, interest in the bearing of Marxist theory on women's liberation seemed perfectly normal – and not just to socialist feminists. Radical feminists also adopted and transformed what they understood to be Marxist concepts.[3]

From these efforts came a voluminous literature. Women's liberationists studied Marxist texts, wrestled with Marxist concepts, and produced a range of original formulations combining, or at least intermingling,

1. This paper first appeared in Vogel 2000. It originated as a presentation at the July 1994 meetings of the Conference of Socialist Economists in Leeds, England. My thanks to Filio Diamante for inviting me and to my co-panelists and audience for lively discussion. In preparing this text for publication, I benefited from the very helpful comments of Christine Di Stefano and a number of anonymous reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my colleague James Dickinson, whose detailed observations and probing questions were, as always, invaluable.

2. It is not possible to separate a socialist from a Marxist feminism as they were practiced in the 1970s; I therefore use the term socialist feminism inclusively. In this paper, I generally follow contemporary American usages of terms. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, the term women's liberation was current, intended to demarcate the younger and presumably more radical branches of the women's movement from the so-called bourgeois feminism of the National Organization for Women. Within the women's liberation movement, socialist feminists formed a distinctive tendency. By the late 1970s, the term women's liberation was being replaced by the term feminism. That feminism was now a broader term than it had been earlier perhaps reflected the declining importance of distinguishing branches within the women's movement.

3. For example, Firestone 1970 and Millett 1970.

Marxism and feminism. Their enthusiasm for this work is hard today to recapture.[4] It turned out, moreover, to be relatively brief. By the end of the 1970s, interest in domestic-labour theorising had dramatically declined. The shift away from the so-called domestic-labour debate was especially pronounced in the United States. In this paper I look again at the challenge of theorising the unwaged labour of housework, child-bearing, and child-rearing. I argue that much of the early domestic-labour literature followed an intellectual agenda that has not been well understood, reviewing my own work in this light. I then consider the reception of such endeavours by their audiences. Finally, I suggest that the early domestic-labour theorists' unfinished project deserves further attention.

Theories and theorising

The notion that something called 'domestic labour' should be theorised emerged as part of a critique launched by North American women's liberationists in the late 1960s and soon picked up elsewhere, notably in Britain. Although central in women's experience, the unpaid work and responsibilities of family-life were rarely addressed in radical thought and socialist practice. Women's liberationists, wanting to ground their own activism in more adequate theory, began to wonder about the theoretical status of the housework and child-care performed in family-households, usually by women. Over the next years, an enormous set of writings known collectively as the domestic-labour debate examined this puzzle.[5]

The domestic-labour literature identified family-households as sites of production. Reconceptualised as domestic labour, housework and child-care could then be analysed as labour-processes. From this beginning came a series of questions. If domestic labour is a labour-process, then what is its product? People? Commodities? Labour-power? Does the product have value? If so, how is that value determined? How and by what or whom is the product consumed? What are the circumstances, conditions, and constraints of domestic labour? What is domestic labour's relationship to the reproduction of labour-power? To overall social reproduction? To capitalist accumulation? Could a mode of reproduction of people be posited, comparable to but separate from the mode of production? Might answers to these questions explain the origins of women's oppression?

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4. For descriptions of the excitement with which feminists confronted Marxist theory in the 1960s and 70s, see Echols 1989; Vogel 1998; and the personal accounts in Duplessis and Snitow (eds.) 1998.

5. For fine (and very short) overviews of the domestic-labour debate, see Himmelweit 1983a and 1983c. For a survey of the literature, see Vogel 1986. See also the essays in Sargent (ed.) 1981, and in Hansen and Philipson 1990.

The burgeoning domestic-labour literature seemed initially to confirm, even legitimate, socialist feminists' double commitment to women's liberation and socialism. Before long, however, a range of problems surfaced. Concepts and categories that had initially seemed self-evident lost their stability. For example, the notion of reproduction of labour-power became surprisingly elastic, stretching from biological procreation to any kind of work that contributed to people's daily maintenance – whether it be paid or unpaid, in private households, in the market, or in the workplace. Likewise, the meaning of the category domestic labour fluctuated. Did it refer simply to housework? Or did it include childbearing and child-care as well? Circular arguments were common. For example, domestic labour was frequently identified with women's work and conversely, thereby assuming the sexual division of labour women's liberationists wished to explain. In addition, the debate's almost exclusive concern with unpaid household-labour discounted the importance of women's paid labour, whether as domestic servants or wage-workers. And its focus on the economic seemed to overlook pressing political, ideological, psychological, and sexual issues.

Women's liberationists also found the abstractness of the domestic-labour literature frustrating. The debate developed in ways that were not only hard to follow but also far from activist-concerns. Concepts appeared to interact among themselves without connection to the empirical world. Not only was the discussion abstract, it seemed ahistorical as well. Perhaps most damaging, much of the domestic-labour literature adopted a functionalist explanatory framework. A social system's need for domestic labour, for example, was taken to imply that that need was invariably satisfied. Where in the debate, many wondered, was human agency? Meanwhile, feminist agendas were bursting with other matters, both theoretical and practical. By the early 1980s, most socialist feminists had decided to move 'beyond the domestic labor debate'. They left behind the ambiguity, conceptual fuzziness, circularity, and loose ends of an unfinished project.[6]

The shift away from the effort to theorise domestic labour within a framework of Marxist political economy seemed to make sense. Many women's liberationists assumed theory to be directly pertinent to day-to-day activities and thought a given theory had determinate political and strategic implications. Conversely, they looked to empirical accounts of history and current circumstances as a way to constitute the appropriate basis for theory.[7] Rejecting the abstractions of the early domestic-labour literature, they sought a conceptual apparatus that could be used to organise and interpret the data of women's lives.

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6. Molyneux 1979.
7. See, for example, Brenner and Holmstrom 1983; Molyneux 1979; or, in its own way, Nicholson 1986.

This approach reflected a particular epistemological orientation, one that put theory into a kind of one-to-one relationship with the empirical. Theory was assumed to be isomorphic with what was understood to be reality. As such, it could produce empirical generalisations, statements of regularity, and models. Explanation and prediction would then depend on extrapolation from these presumably accurate representations. In this view, familiar from the social-scientific literature, theory is a broad-ranging intellectual activity, grounded in the empirical and capable of supplying descriptions, explanations, and predictions – and thereby able as well to guide policy or strategy.

This is not the only way to think about theory, however. Much of the early domestic-labour literature implicitly adopted a different perspective, rooted in certain readings of Marxist theory current in the 1960s and 70s. Associated most famously with the French philosopher Louis Althusser, this alternative perspective accords theory an epistemological specificity and a limited scope. Theory, in this view, is a powerful but highly abstract enterprise and sharply different from history.[8] As Althusser put it, speaking of Marx's *Capital*:

> Despite appearances, Marx does not analyze any 'concrete society', not even England, which he mentions constantly in Volume One, but the *capitalist mode of production* and nothing else. This object is an abstract one: which means that it is terribly real and that it never *exists* in the pure state, since it only exists in capitalist societies. Simply speaking: in order to be able to analyse these concrete capitalist societies (England, France, Russia, etc.), it is essential to know that they are dominated by that terribly concrete reality, the capitalist mode of production, which is 'invisible' (to the naked eye). 'Invisible', *i.e. abstract.*[9]

From this perspective, theory is necessarily abstract as well as severely constrained in its implications. It can point to key elements and tendencies but it cannot provide richly textured accounts of social life. Even less does it directly explain events, suggest strategies, or evaluate the prospects for political action. These are matters for a qualitatively distinct kind of inquiry – one that examines the specifics of particular historical conjunctures in existing social formations.

To put it another way, this alternative approach conceptualises theory as a sort of lens. By itself, the lens tells us little about the specifics of a particular society at a particular moment. It is only by using the lens that observers can evaluate such specifics and strategise for the future. Compared to theorising – producing

8. See, among others, Althusser 1971a; Hindess and Hirst 1975; Willer and Willer 1973; as well as Marx 1973d.

9. Althusser 1971a, p. 77.

the lens – these tasks of empirical investigation and political analysis constitute intellectual work of a different and, I would argue, more challenging sort.

A different starting point

I turn now to my own work on domestic labour. My purpose in so doing is to offer an example of women's liberationist theorising within the intentionally abstract framework just described. From this perspective, the domestic-labour debate was a theoretical, rather than historical or sociological project. Its outcome would be expected to take the form of sets of abstract concepts and identifications of possible mechanisms and tendencies. These could not, by themselves, really 'explain' anything concrete – neither the rich, idiosyncratic, and constructed character of experience nor the specific nature and direction of popular mobilisation or social transformation. Even less could they suggest political strategies. Such questions would be matters for empirical investigation and political analysis by the actors involved.

The challenge, then, was to discover or create categories to theorise women's unpaid family-work as a material process. Women's liberationists, myself included, examined the classic texts of Marx, Engels, Bebel, and others, discovering only a precarious theoretical legacy at best. This finding led, in my case, to a lengthy critical reading of Marx. In this reading I followed what I understood to be Althusser's advice:

> Do not look to *Capital* either for a book of 'concrete' history or for a book of 'empirical' political economy, in the sense in which historians and economists understand these terms. Instead, find in it a book of theory analysing the *capitalist mode of production.* History (concrete history) and economics (empirical economics) have other objects.[10]

Using this approach to theory, I hoped to be able to contribute to the construction of a more satisfactory theoretical lens with which to analyse women's subordination.

As my conceptual point of departure I considered two notions basic to Marx's work: labour-power and the reproduction of labour-power. For Marx, labour-power is a capacity borne by a human being and distinguishable from the bodily and social existence of its bearer. Labour-power's potential is realised when its bearer makes something useful – a use-value – which may or may not be exchanged. The bearers of labour-power are, however, mortal and suffer wear and tear; every individual eventually dies. Some process that meets the ongoing

10. Althusser 1971a, p. 78.

personal needs of the bearers of labour-power is therefore a condition of social reproduction, as is some process that replaces them over time. These processes of daily maintenance and long-run replacement are conflated in the term reproduction of labour-power.

In class-divided societies, dominant classes somehow harness labour-power's ability to produce use-values for their own benefit. For clarity, I therefore restricted the concept of reproduction of labour-power to the processes that maintain and replace labour-power capable of producing a surplus for an appropriating class.[11] In the remainder of this section, I look very briefly at several characteristics of the reproduction of such labour-power: the processes involved, the role of biological procreation, and certain inherent contradictions. This prepares the way for the next section's discussion of reproduction of labour-power in capitalist societies.

Marx considered the reproduction of labour-power to be central to social reproduction, but he never provided a thoroughgoing exposition of just what it entailed. At times he focused on renewal of the individual labourer; elsewhere, he underscored the importance of maintaining and replacing non-working members of the working class. For clarity, again, I therefore distinguished three kinds of processes that make up the reproduction of labour-power in class-societies. First, a variety of daily activities restore the energies of direct producers and enable them to return to work. Second, similar activities maintain non-labouring members of subordinate classes – those who are too young, old, or sick, or who themselves are involved in maintenance-activities or out of the workforce for other reasons. And third, replacement-processes renew the labour-force by replacing members of the subordinate classes who have died or no longer work.

With these three kinds of processes disentangled, the concept of reproduction of labour-power can be freed from normative assumptions concerning biological procreation in heterosexual family-contexts. Although the reproduction of labour-power in actual societies has usually involved child-rearing within kin-based settings called families, it can, in principle, be organised in other ways, at least for a period of time. The present set of labourers could be housed in dormitories, maintained collectively, worked to death, and then replaced by new workers, brought from outside. This harsh régime has actually been approximated many times through history. Gold-mines in Roman Egypt, rubber-plantations in French Indochina, and Nazi *Arbeitslager* all come to mind. More commonly, an existing labour-force is replenished in two ways. First, by processes of what I

11. The concept of the reproduction of labour-power thus becomes pertinent, strictly speaking, only to subordinate classes. This is not to say that dominant-class women do not experience gender-subordination. Rather, their situation is associated with their roles in the maintenance and replacement of property-owning classes and requires its own analysis.

term 'generational replacement', whereby workers bear children who grow up to become workers themselves. And second, by the entry of new workers into the labour-force. For example, individuals who had not previously participated at all may become involved in wage-labour, as when wives entered the American labour-market in the 1950s. People may enter the work-force sporadically, at harvest, for instance, or during economic crises. Immigrants can cross national boundaries to enter a society's labour-force. Persons may also be forcibly kidnapped, transported far from home, and coerced into a new workforce, as was done for New-World slave-plantations.

From the theoretical point of view, in other words, the reproduction of labour-power is not invariably associated with private kin-based households, as the domestic-labour debate commonly assumed. In particular, it does not necessarily entail any or all of the following: heterosexuality, biological procreation, family-forms, or generational replacement. Nonetheless, most class-societies have institutionalised daily-maintenance and generational-replacement processes in a system of heterosexual family-forms. That such arrangements are empirically so common probably reflects their advantages – contested and constantly renegotiated – over the alternatives.

Class-societies that rely on biological procreation for the reproduction of labour-power encounter several contradictions. While pregnant and for a short time thereafter, subordinate-class women experience at least a brief period of somewhat reduced ability to work and/or to engage in the activities of daily maintenance. During such periods of lower activity, the women must themselves be maintained. In this way, child-bearing can diminish the contribution subordinate-class women make as direct producers and as participants in maintenance activities.[12] From the perspective of dominant classes, such child-bearing is therefore potentially costly, for pregnant-women's labour and that which provides for them might otherwise have formed part of surplus-labour. At the same time, subordinate-class child-bearing replenishes the work-force and thereby benefits dominant classes. There is a latent contradiction, then, between dominant classes' need to appropriate surplus-labour and their requirements for labour-power to perform it.

From the perspective of subordinate classes, other contradictions may emerge. Arrangements for the reproduction of labour-power usually take advantage of relationships between women and men based on sexuality and kinship. Other individuals, frequently the biological father and his kin-group or the kin of the child-bearing woman herself, have the responsibility for making sure women are

12. Paddy Quick (Quick 1977) argues that the core material basis for women's subordination in class-societies is not the sexual division of labour or gender-difference *per se*, but the need to maintain subordinate-class women during child-bearing.

provided for during periods of diminished activity associated with childbearing. Although in principle women's and men's differential roles need only last during those child-bearing months, most societies assign them to the variety of social structures known as families, which become sites for the performance of daily-maintenance as well as generational-replacement activities. The arrangements are ordinarily legitimated by male domination backed up by institutionalised structures of female oppression.

How these various contradictions manifest themselves and are confronted in actual class-societies cannot be directly derived from their existence at this very general level. This discussion simply shows that subordinate-class women's child-bearing capacity positions them differently from men with respect to the processes of surplus-appropriation and reproduction of labour-power. While they may also be workers, it is subordinate-class women's differential role in the maintenance and replacement of labour-power that marks their particular situation.[13]

Capitalism and domestic labour

The previous section considered elements of the reproduction of labour-power in the case of societies divided by class. In this section I look at the reproduction of labour-power in that distinctive kind of class-society known as capitalism. On this topic Marx had a fair amount to say but, as the domestic-labour literature showed, it was nonetheless not enough.[14]

In capitalist societies, according to Marx, labour-power takes the specific form of a commodity, that is, a thing that has not only use-value but also exchange-value. Borne by persons, this commodity has certain peculiarities. Its use-value is its capacity, when put to work in a capitalist production-process, to be the source of more value than it itself is worth. Its exchange-value – what it costs to buy the labour-power on the market – is 'the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of the laborer',[15] an amount that is established historically and socially in a given society at a particular moment.

To explore the relationship between labour-power's value and capital's interest in surplus-appropriation, Marx used an abstraction: the working day of a single working man, expressed in hours. (For Marx, the worker was always male, of

13. Likewise, dominant-class women have a special but quite different role in the maintenance and replacement of their class.

14. The following three paragraphs radically compress Marx's discussions of aspects of the reproduction of labour-power. Marx discussed the material at great length and with ample empirical illustration.

15. Marx 1971a, p. 167.

course.) He defined 'necessary labor' as the portion of a day's labour that enables the worker to purchase the means of subsistence. And he defined 'surplus labor' as the remainder of the day's labour, which the capitalist appropriates.[16] To put it another way, the worker works part of the time for himself and the rest of the time for the boss. The first, the worker's necessary labour, corresponds to his wages; the second, his surplus-labour, constitutes surplus-value at the disposal of the boss.

For Marx, capitalist accumulation creates a constantly changing profit-driven system. If capitalists must seek more and more profits, it is in their interest to seek reductions of necessary labour. Marx discussed methods (other than cheating) they can use to achieve such a reduction. On the one hand, they can lengthen working hours or intensify the pace of work without changing the value of labour-power. More hours or more intense work means the worker expends more labour-power for the same wage. That is, his labour-power is cheapened. Marx called this kind of reduction of necessary labour 'absolute surplus value'. On the other hand, capitalists can reduce necessary labour by making the production-process more productive. Greater productivity means the worker needs fewer working hours to complete necessary labour and more surplus-value goes to the boss. Within limits, a wage-increase could even be granted. Marx called this kind of reduction of necessary labour 'relative surplus value'.

Marx's discussion of the relationship between necessary and surplus-labour within the working day is wonderfully clear. At the same time, its focus on a single individual labourer perforce excludes consideration of all the additional labour that secures not only the workingman's maintenance and replacement but also that of his kin and community and of the workforce overall.[17] That these various processes can be omitted from Marx's account, at least at this point, is an effect of capitalism's particular social organisation. As in no other mode of production, daily-maintenance and generational-replacement tasks are spatially, temporally, and institutionally isolated from the sphere of production. In his concept of 'individual consumption', Marx recognised that capitalism gives life off the job a radically distinct character from wage-labour. Individual consumption happens when 'the laborer turns the money paid to him for his labor-power into means of subsistence.'[18] Marx's main interest, here, is to contrast the worker's individual consumption of means of subsistence with his 'productive consumption' of means of production while on the job. But he said little about the actual

16. Strictly speaking, a portion of the value created by the worker's labour goes to replace constant capital.

17. Elsewhere, Marx recognised that such labour was a condition for overall social reproduction.

18. Marx 1971a, p. 536.

work involved in individual consumption. Here was a realm of economic activity essential to capitalist production yet missing from Marx's exposition.

The domestic-labour literature sought, in various ways, to make visible the workings of the reproduction of labour-power in capitalist societies. From my perspective, this meant reconceptualising necessary labour to incorporate the processes of reproduction of labour-power. Necessary labour has, I argued, two components. The first, discussed by Marx, is the necessary labour that produces value equivalent to wages. This component, which I called the social component of necessary labour, is indissolubly bound with surplus-labour in the capitalist production-process. The second component of necessary labour, deeply veiled in Marx's account, is the unwaged work that contributes to the daily and long-term renewal of bearers of the commodity labour-power and of the working class as a whole.[19] I called this the domestic component of necessary labour, or domestic labour.

Defined this way, domestic labour became a concept specific to capitalism and without fixed gender assignment. This freed it from several common-sense assumptions that haunted the domestic-labour debate, most especially the notion that domestic labour is universal and that it is necessarily women's work.

The social and domestic components of necessary labour are not directly comparable, for the latter does not have value.[20] This means that the highly visible and very valuable social component of necessary labour is accompanied by a shadowy, unquantifiable, and (technically) valueless domestic-labour component. Although only one component appears on the market and can be seen clearly, the reproduction of labour-power entails both. Wages may enable workers to purchase commodities, but additional labour – domestic labour – must generally be performed as well. Food-commodities are prepared and clothes maintained and cleaned. Children are not only cared for but also taught the skills they need to become competent working-class adults. Working-class individuals who are sick, disabled, or enfeebled are attended to. These various tasks are at least partly undertaken by domestic labour.

In other words, I argued that necessary labour is a more complicated conceptual category than previously thought. It has two components, one with value and the other without. Domestic labour, the previously missing second compo-

19. At this level of abstraction, I use the term working-class to indicate all those who are propertyless in the sense of not owning the means of production. The majority of the population in the United States today, as elsewhere, is in this sense working-class, making it necessary in less abstract contexts to consider the stratification of households by occupation, education, income, and so forth.

20. The question of whether or not domestic labour has value in the Marxist sense triggered its own mini-debate within the women's liberationist literature. In my view, it does not. For an exposition of why, see Smith 1978.

nent, is sharply different from the social component yet similarly indispensable to capitalist social reproduction. It lacks value, but nonetheless plays a key role in the process of surplus-value appropriation. Locked together in the performance of necessary labour, social labour and its newfound mate, domestic labour, form an odd couple never before encountered in Marxist theory.[21]

Capitalists' interest in reducing necessary labour may extend to its domestic as well as its social component. If some people devote much of their energies to domestic labour – hauling water from the well, cooking on a hearth, washing clothes by boiling them, teaching children the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and so forth – then they are less available for work in production. By contrast, when domestic labour is reduced, additional labour-power is potentially released into the labour-market. Reduction of domestic labour has been an ongoing process in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the early 1900s, food-preparation was less time-consuming, laundry was in some ways less onerous, and schools had taken over most of the task of teaching skills. More recently, frozen food, microwaves, laundromats, and the increased availability of day-care, nursery, kindergarten, and after-school programmes have decreased domestic labour even further.[22] Reduction of domestic labour through technological and non-technological means does not inevitably make households send more of their members' labour-power onto the market. It does, however, create a greater possibility that they might do so.

In short, capitalists as a class are caught between a number of conflicting pressures, including: their long-term need for a labour-force, their short-term demands for different categories of workers and consumers, their profit requirements, and their desire to maintain hegemony over a divided working class. In the abstract of my theoretical construction, these contradictory pressures generate tendencies, of course, not preordained inevitabilities. Such tendencies do not necessarily produce outcomes favourable to dominant classes, as functionalist interpretations would have it. Rather, the processes of reproduction of labour-power constitute an embattled terrain. In actual societies, capitalists adopt a variety of strategies, some of which involve manipulating domestic labour in ways

21. This discussion, which clarifies but does not alter my earlier argument (Vogel 1983), now seems to me less persuasive. What is clear, however, is that whether domestic labour is conceptualised as a component of necessary labour or not, the bottom line is that some way to theorise it within Marxist political economy must be found.

22. Nona Glazer (Glazer 1987) discusses 'work-transfer' as an important twentieth-century counter-tendency to domestic-labour reduction. Work-transfer occurs when labour formerly performed by clerks is transferred to self-service shoppers, thereby increasing domestic labour. Martha Gimenez (Gimenez 1990) incorporates Glazer's work transfer into her discussion of four distinct kinds of domestic labour. Significant though the various mechanisms of work-transfer are, I would doubt that they contradict long-term tendencies for households to decrease the total amount of domestic labour performed.

that can be analysed as creating absolute or relative surplus-value. At the same time, working people strive to win the best conditions for their own renewal, which may include a particular level and type of domestic labour. Because both capital and labour are ordinarily fragmented into distinct sectors, the results are not uniform across layers.

A contradictory tendential dynamic thus threads through historical struggles over the conditions for the reproduction of the commodity labour-power. Particular outcomes have included the family-wage for certain groups, protective legislation covering female and child industrial workers, sex- and race-segregation in the labour-market, migrant-labour housed in barracks, and so forth.[23]

To this point I have discussed the reproduction of the commodity labour-power as an economic phenomenon.[24] There is, however, a key political phenomenon that also pertains, a tendency towards equality. Marx argued that this fundamental political feature of capitalist societies has a basis in the articulation of production and circulation.[25] In production, a great range of concrete useful labour is rendered equivalent as human labour in the abstract, or value. In circulation, commodities can be exchanged on the market when they embody comparable amounts of that value. Labour-power is, of course, also a commodity, bought and sold on the market. Workers and capitalists thus meet in the marketplace as owners seeking to exchange their commodities. For transactions to take place, capitalists must offer wages that are equivalent to the value of workers' labour-power. Contrary to notions of capitalism as a cheating system, this is an equal exchange. Equality in the market goes hand in hand with exploitation in production.

Equality of persons is not, then, an abstract principle or false ideology but a complex tendency with roots in the articulation of the spheres of production and circulation. Lack of equality, I argue, represents a specific feature of women's (and other groups') oppression in capitalist societies. Only subordinate-class

23. This analysis of domestic labour as a key component of the reproduction of labour-power has an empirical counterpart in the way studies of the working class have changed over the past three decades. Rather than focus just on workers and their unions, numerous researchers look more broadly at working-class households and communities as bearers, maintainers, and replacers of labour-power. See Sacks 1989; Glucksmann 1990.

24. I agree with Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1998) that most of what can loosely be termed gender-relations is not in the economic sphere. My claim here is that there is nonetheless some piece that *is* economic, that it plays a role in the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, and that its theorisation belongs to political economy. This important but limited economic aspect of women's oppression in capitalism is surely one of the factors that marks its specificity as opposed to, for example, racial or class-subordination.

25. Here, again, I radically compress a lengthier account in Marx.

women perform domestic labour, as discussed above, but all women suffer from lack of equality in capitalist societies.

Efforts to expand equality's scope make radical challenges on at least two fronts. First, they tend to reduce divisions within and among subordinate layers and sectors, by moving all persons towards a more equal footing. Second, they can reveal the fundamentally exploitative character of capitalism, for the further rights are extended, the more capitalism's economic and social character is exposed. Far from exercises in fruitless reformism or supposedly divisive identity-politics, struggles for equality can contribute to building strategic alliances and even point beyond capitalism.

To sum up the theoretical scenario I offered, in all its abstractness: In the capitalist mode of production, the logic of accumulation and the articulation between the spheres of production and circulation doubly mark women's position. On the one hand, subordinate-class women and men are differentially located with respect to important economic aspects of social reproduction. On the other, all women are denied equal rights. In actual societies, the dynamics of women's subordination respond to this dual positioning, among other factors.

Audiences and paradigms

Efforts to theorise domestic labour addressed two distinct audiences in the 1970s: feminists, especially socialist feminists, and the Left. Most feminists eventually rejected the domestic-labour literature as a misguided effort to apply inappropriate Marxist categories. Most Marxists simply disregarded the debate, neither following nor participating in it. Neither potential audience fully grasped the ways that socialist feminists were suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that Marxist theory had to be revised.

One factor that ultimately limited the feminist audience was the domestic-labour debate's approach to theory. As discussed earlier, many feminists had difficulty with the epistemological perspective that underlay much of the domestic-labour literature. Not only was it extremely abstract, it also considered the scope of theory to be severely limited. In particular, questions of subjectivity and agency fell outside theory of this sort. These questions belonged, rather, to the difficult and messy realm of concrete historical investigation and analysis. Most feminists came to reject this view of theory and sought instead to found theory on detailed empirical description. A powerful but generally unacknowledged difference of theoretical paradigm thus separated the two perspectives. As is far more apparent to me now than it was years ago, the holders of one could not communicate effectively with those partial to the other. Even the task of

reading each other's work, not to mention that of usefully critiquing it, encountered the obstacle of paradigm incompatibility.[26]

Through the 1970s, the Left was mostly hostile to the notion of developing a feminist socialism, much less that of revising Marxist theory. In many camps, feminism was considered inherently bourgeois as well as a threat to class-unity. US Marxist theorists, mostly male, generally ignored the domestic-labour literature. In part, the problem here was again a paradigm-incompatibility, this time of a different sort. From a traditional-Marxist perspective, the dynamics of capitalism had ultimately to do with class-exploitation. Other issues – for example, gender-, race-, or national oppression – might be important concerns for socialists, but they lay outside what was understood to be the realm of Marxist theory.

The audiences for domestic-labour theorising dramatically contracted in the 1980s. Playing a role in the downturn, certainly, were the increasingly conservative political climate and the decline or destruction of many radical social movements. Feminist intellectual work managed to flourish, but with far fewer links than earlier to women's movement activism. Surviving on college- and university-campuses, it encountered a range of disciplinary constraints and professional pressures. Younger generations of feminist scholars had missed, moreover, the chance to participate in a radical women's liberation movement rooted in the upheavals of the 1960s. Not surprisingly, confidence in the relevance of socialist thought to feminist theory diminished.

The 1980s and '90s did not, to the surprise of some, witness the demise of domestic-labour theorising. Rather, a certain level of interest has persisted. Where there are relatively strong traditions of Marxist theory for one reason or another, as in England and Canada, small communities of economists, sociologists, and historians, male as well as female, continue to address questions descended from those posed in the early domestic-labour literature.[27]

In these years in the United States, however, relatively fewer researchers have been involved with the issues posed in the domestic-labour debate. Feminists who continue to use the terminology often do so in a manner more metaphorical than analytical. Domestic labour, for example, is still taken to mean some-

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26. Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1962) describes the many ways theoretical paradigms remain invisible while powerfully framing their users' thinking. With respect to the theoretical framework under discussion, Althusser (Althusser 1993, pp. 185–6) also comments on the phenomenon: 'From the outset we had insisted on drawing a structural distinction between a *combinatory* (abstract) and a *combination* (concrete), which created the major problem. But did anyone acknowledge it? No one took any notice of the distinction . . . No one was interested in [my approach to] theory. Only a few individuals understood my reasons and objectives'.

27. For England, see the bibliography in Gardiner 1997, and the journal *Capital & Class*. For Canada, see Hamilton and Barrett 1990, and the journal *Studies in Political Economy*.

thing whose site and workers are obvious (the private household, women) and whose content is self-evident (usually, housework, or housework and child-care). Reproduction, a term with meanings within several distinct intellectual traditions that were at first the subject of much discussion, has also acquired a generic meaning.[28] Along with a new phrase, 'reproductive labour', it now often covers a wide range of activities contributing to the renewal of people, including emotional and intellectual as well as manual labour, and waged as well as unwaged work. Reviewing the literature, Evelyn Nakano Glenn[29] observes that:

> The term *social reproduction* has come to be more broadly conceived . . . to refer to the creation and recreation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical, beings. Thus it involves mental, emotional, and manual labor. This labor can be organized in myriad ways – in and out of the household, as paid or unpaid work, creating exchange value or only use value . . . . [For example, food production] can be done by a family member as unwaged work in the household, by a servant as waged work in the household, or by a short-order cook in a fast-food restaurant as waged work that generates profit.

US Marxist theorists in the 1980s and 90s have continued to be mostly male and generally inattentive to several decades of socialist–feminist scholarship and commentary. Many take feminism to be an instance of a so-called identity-politics that can only balkanise the Left. They worry as well about the unity of Marxist theory. At the same time, they seem not to be aware of the range of current debates and discussions that address these very problems. A handful have begun, however, to enter the dialogue. Some cover ground already well travelled in the domestic-labour debate, even reinventing analyses first proposed by feminists in the 1970s. Others interpret the issues surrounding female oppression as matters of language, psychology, or sexuality. In so doing, they construct women's subordination as wholly external to the processes of surplus-appropriation and capitalist social reproduction and therefore not the subject of Marxist political economy.

Early domestic-labour theorists sought to put women's lives at the heart of the workings of capitalism. They were among the first to intuit the coming crisis of Marxism and to begin exploring the limitations of Marxist theory. Their challenge to feminist theory and to the tradition of Marxist political economy remains, in my view, an unfinished project.

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28. For 1970s considerations of the meanings of the concept of reproduction, see Edholm, Harris, and Young 1977; and Beechey 1979. See also Himmelweit 1983b.

29. Glenn 1992.

Domestic labour in the twenty-first Century

The domestic-labour literature insisted that women's oppression is central to overall social reproduction. Despite all its problems, this insight remains valid. Capital still demands reliable sources of exploitable labour-power and appropriately configured consumers of commodities – demands that are perennially the object of struggle and not always met. With global restructuring, the processes through which labour-power is maintained and replaced are undergoing radical transformation and domestic labour remains key to these changes. The forms of domestic labour proliferate, moving ever further from the male-breadwinner/female-dependent nuclear-family norm. Most households contribute increasing amounts of time to wage-labour, generally reducing the amount and quality of domestic labour their members perform. Other households are caught in persistent joblessness, intensifying marginality, and an impoverished level and kind of domestic labour. Here, it could be argued, the reproduction of a sector of labour-power is in question.[30] The processes of labour-power renewal also disperse geographically, frequently moving across national boundaries. Migration becomes more widespread, dividing families and producing new kinds of non-kin as well as kin-based sites of domestic labour. Meanwhile, the expanded scope and availability of rights-based equality to traditionally marginalised groups, beneficial in many ways, creates unanticipated hazards.[31]

At the turn of the twenty-first century, heavy burdens fall on women, alongside undeniably empowering changes. These burdens include, among others, the double day, absent husbands, isolation from kin, and single motherhood without adequate social support. In short, women's experience still points to the question of theorising domestic labour and its role in capitalist social reproduction.

30. Gimenez (Gimenez 1990, p. 37) suggests that such households 'simply reproduce people; and [the labor power of] people . . . without marketable skills, [has] no value under capitalist conditions'. For a different interpretation, see Sassen 1998.

31. See, for example, Vogel 1995.

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